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Screening

Peter Wollen: Photography

Noël Burch: Edwin S Porter and Primitive Cinema

Colin MacCabe: Discourse, Cinema and Politics

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith: TV and the World Cup

Mick Eaton: TV Sit-Com

SCREEN Day Event

Instead of its quarterly readers' meetings, the *Screen* Editorial Board will be holding a day event on Saturday 28 April 1979, at the Polytechnic of Central London, 309 Regent Street, London W1.

The morning session (11.00 am-1.00 pm), introduced by members of the Editorial Board, will be concerned with notions of art cinema. The afternoon session (2.00 pm-3.30 pm) will be an open session, in which we hope readers will raise issues across the range of *Screen's* work in the last four numbers of the magazine (v19 nn1-4).

The event will be run on the same basis as readers' meetings — there will be no additional documentation, no admission fee and no need to 'book' a place.

SCREEN EDUCATION

Number 28 Autumn 1978

John Tagg: The Currency of the Photograph. Richard Nice/Annette Kuhn: Bourdieu. Philip Simpson: Gramsci. Dick Hebdige and Geoff Hurd: Reading and Realism. John Corner and Sylvia Harvey: Communication Studies. Jill Forbes: May '68.

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Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie: Rock and Sexuality. Jo Spence: Class and Gender in Images of Women. Gregg Blachford: Pornography. Gill Davies: Narrative. Tony Stevens: The Renovation of Eng Lit. Rob Moore: The Value of Reproduction. John O Thompson: *Nationwide*.

Subscriptions and prices: see page 112.

The *Screen* Editorial Board welcomes manuscripts and proposals for articles from contributors. It is very helpful if manuscripts are typed double spaced with wide margins and are suitable for photocopying. Manuscripts will be acknowledged on receipt, submitted to the Board for its consideration and the Board's decision conveyed to the writer.

- 6 Argentina. He argues for television as representation, but also for football itself as living largely in representation. Football as a complex unity of representations (of which the actual match is but a small component) is available for a variety of identifications which can be displaced into politics, identifications which televisual representations participate in and support, without there being the need to posit any pre-given correspondence determining their articulation.

Television's institution of spectatorship is also examined in Mick Eaton's article which considers a hitherto neglected television form – the situation comedy. He considers its specifically televisual aspects: the inscription of the television viewing situation as guarantor both of the truth of the narrative and of the necessity of watching'; and the sit-com itself as particularly televisual, both because of its reproducibility as series (with all the economies of programme scheduling, production and marketing that involves) and its structures of repetition. The situation comedy is seen as an example of television's constant reinstatement of the terms of its own past, its own memory and our memory of it: 'the re-affirmation and re-positioning of the individual in relation not only to the past *in* television, but also the past *of* television, and the past or present of him or herself as "television viewer".'

The novelistic is also implicitly at issue in Noël Burch's article on the film-maker Edwin S Porter. Burch argues for early cinema as formed by three different forces: modes of popular representation familiar to and addressed to a working class audience; the pressure of specifically bourgeois modes of representation; and the ideology of scientism – cinema used as an analytic tool. He distinguishes two phases, two specificities of cinema history: an early 'primitive' mode, in which bourgeois forms are not yet dominant; and an 'institutional' mode marked by the dominance of narrative and the novelistic. The work of Porter is seen as a point of intersection, co-existence of these two modes. He analyses several films, pointing to tensions symptomatic of the conflict between these two modes: on the one hand a 'loose autarchy' of a-centred tableaux 'leading nowhere' and on the other a linearisation, a binding together of the signifying chain in a narrative direction. This analysis raises questions for *Screen* of the conjunctural specificity of the novelistic, and of the significance of a return to such primitive modes in recent avant-garde cinema.

Peter Wollen's article resumes concerns with forms of representation other than televisual and cinematic which have been absent from the pages of *Screen* for too long. In some ways Wollen's article is a companion piece to Walter Benjamin's 'A Short History of Photography' published in *Screen* Spring 1972, v13 n1. Wollen is also concerned with the history of photography, in particular he stresses the continuing and varying relations of painting with photography and the aesthetic issues at stake in

the debates around pictorialism: the problem of establishing a distinct identity for photography and its practitioners separate both from 'established' media such as painting and etching, and from photography as record; modernist photography's attempted integration of art and record; and the renewed separation in the pictorialism of the *New Objectivity* photographers (such as Renger Patzsch, one of whose collection of photographs was symptomatically titled *The World is Beautiful*) against whom both Benjamin and Brecht polemicised. Wollen links Benjamin's search for photography as a means of producing knowledge to concerns underlying most progressive 20th century art, of holding together the apparently opposite are incompatible terms of 19th century aesthetic debates: Lessing's notions of aesthetic purism with Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* aesthetic. Current practices of photography he argues cut across this problematic with their introduction of concerns of narrative and point-of-view.

Finally, we would like to draw reader's attention to our Day meeting on April 28th (further details on p4). The Editorial Board thought that a day event would enable more sustained presentations and discussions to take place and that readers living in the regions would find it more convenient to attend a day event than the short quarterly meetings.

MARK NASH

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PIERRE MACHEREY

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Photography and Aesthetics

Peter Wollen

Most discussion of photography centres around the commonplace fact that it provides information about the appearance of objects and events in the world. This in turn has led on to two related preoccupations. First, what is the connection between art and information? How can photography be an art if it is tied to the automatic production of information? Second, what is the connection between knowledge and information? How can photography produce knowledge if it is tied to the registration of momentary appearances? This is a problem whether you believe that knowledge reflects an essence behind or within appearances or whether you believe it to be a necessary displacement from appearances to a distinct order of discourse, symbolic rather than imaginary or iconic.

A third question is obviously involved too. What is the connection between knowledge and art? In this article, I shall hold this question in suspense, working on the assumption that answers will derive from discussion of the first two questions, rather than the other way round. In the past it has been almost universally agreed that art represents a specific form of knowledge and from this aprioristic ground every kind of aesthetic-cum-epistemological position has been argued at will. Photography provides a very good opportunity to start at the other end, with its claims to be an art or to produce knowledge, and to work from there towards a sense of the relationship between the two. Photography struggled to conquer territories *prima facie* denied it, which may indeed turn out to be the same, adjacent or far apart.

During the nineteenth century and up at least to the 1920s, the struggle on the first front was by far the most prominent. No sooner had Kant announced that objective distinctness must be distinguished from subjective, concept from intuition, hence science

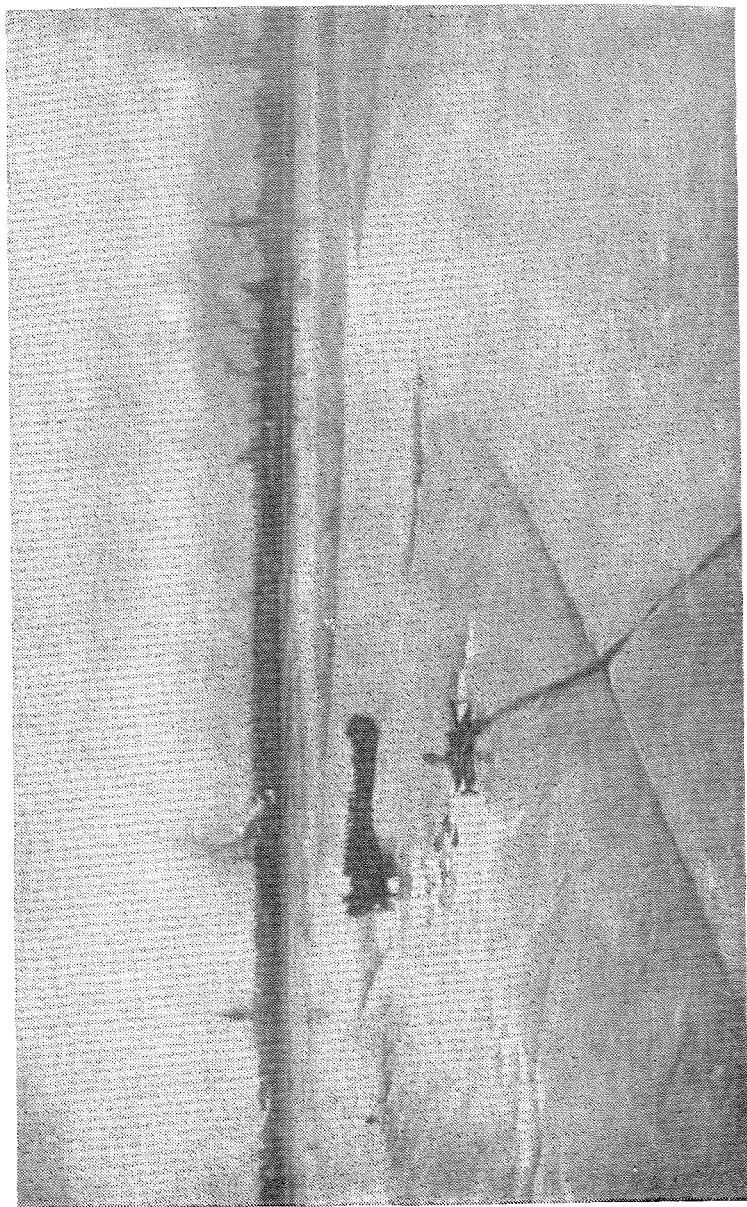
10 from art, than advances in chemistry and geometry made possible the invention of photography and modern technical draughtsmanship, twin threats to painting, later combined in parodic form by Marcel Duchamp at the acme of modernism.¹ Painting responded by embracing the Kantian perspective, stressing the subjective and the intuitive, and at the same time discarding fiction (the 'literary') and increasingly returning to nature. This return to nature itself necessitated a very clear distinction between the 'artistic' and the 'photographic', which became a term of abuse.

Photography, tactically on the defence but strategically on the attack, reproduced this distinction within itself as one between 'pictorial photography' and 'photography of record'. Photography of record was expected to provide a maximum of precise detail – clarity of information – whereas pictorial photography provided clarity of composition, of selection of the significant feature rather than accumulation of the insignificant. (Within the general outlook of positivism it was felt that, for science, every detail was necessarily significant; knowledge depended on the accumulation of facts. For art however there were constraints on significance: multiplicity must be reduced to unity *in concreto* rather than through posterior analysis). Almost all pictorial photographers deliberately avoided uniform sharpness of focus and overall illumination. They 'selected', partly through choice of view and angle, but also by producing soft, often diffused, prints with calculated areas of darkness and indistinctness.

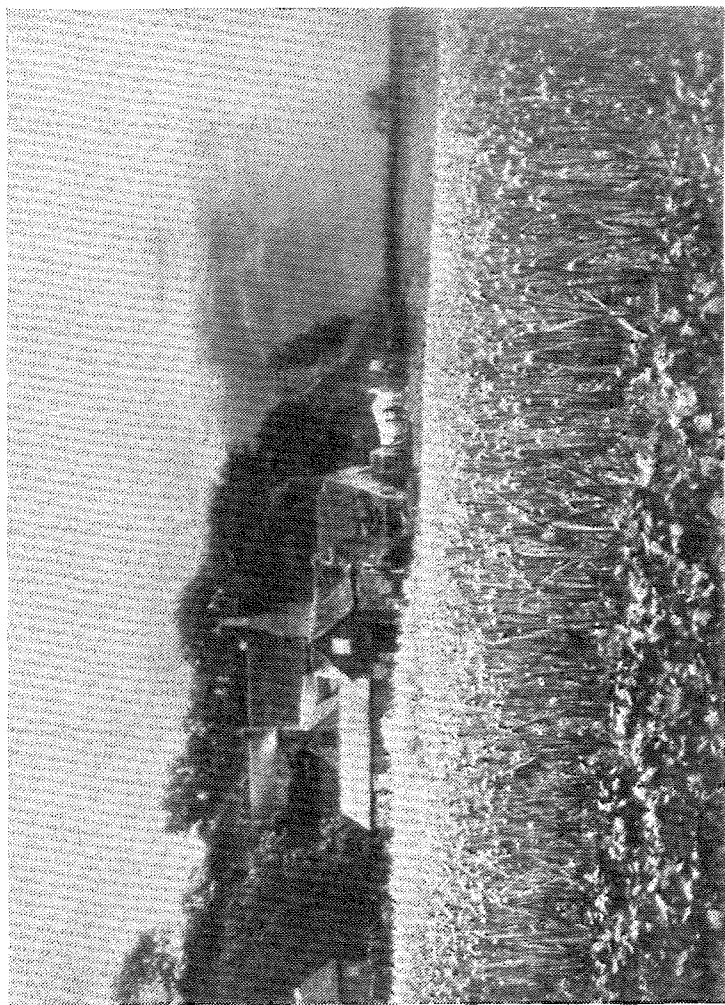
Despite their general agreement, pictorialist photographers were constantly feuding among themselves; the history of pictorialism contains endless secessions, rejections and splits. In retrospect these seem very dependent on the backwash from developments in painting. Emerson's defence of 'naturalistic photography', and the counterblasts from Robinson, represent the impact of the French *pleinairistes*.² Robinson, who photographed posed genre and allegorical scenes (as well as combining different negatives in one print) and whose most admired painters were Millais and Holman Hunt, was exhorted to return to nature by Emerson, who cited the Barbizon School and Millet. Later pictorialists fell under the spell of Whistler, and Davison, whose 'The Onion Field', photo-

1 See Jean Clair's *Duchamp et la Photographie* (Paris, 1977) and, for suggestive comparisons with pure technical drawing, the illustrations in *Le Macchine Celibi/The Bachelor Machines*, Venice, 1975. P J Booker's *A History of Engineering Drawing* (London, 1963) provides an excellent account of a neglected area.

2 For Robinson's views see *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, London, 1869; for Emerson's: *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*, London, 1889. Shorter, characteristic texts by both men are reprinted in Nathan Lyons's *Photographers on Photography*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966. They were both very vigorous controversialists quite unafraid of either prejudice or abuse, which they relished and lavished liberally on others.



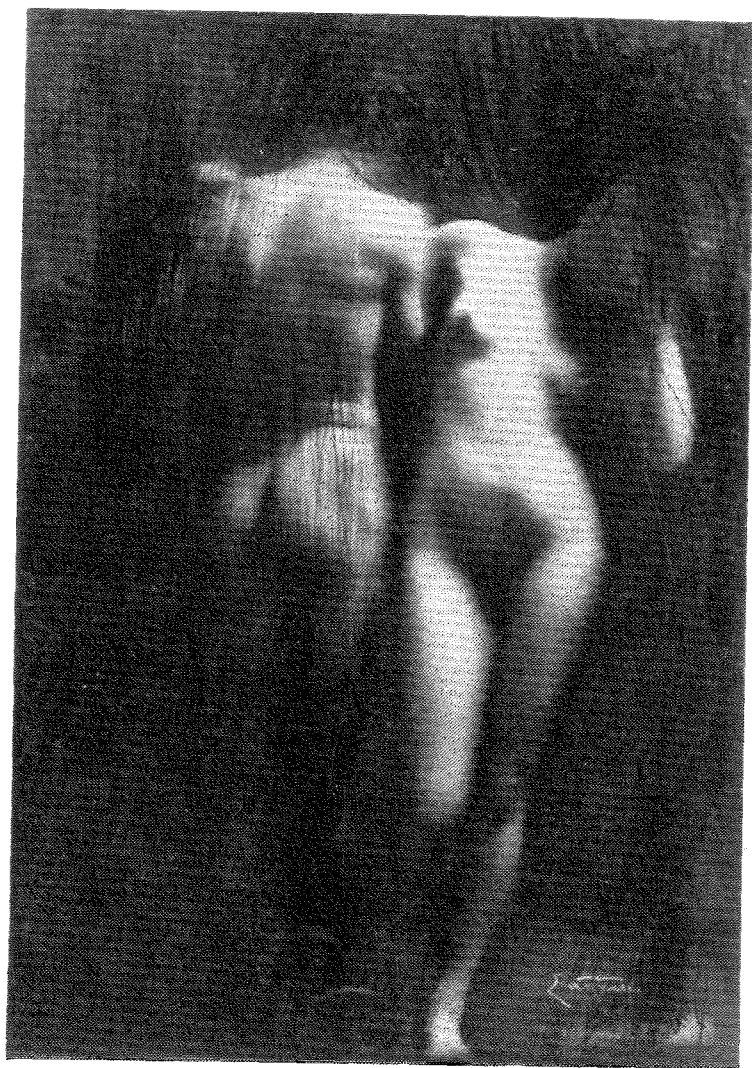
P H Emerson *The Last of the Ebb - Great Yarmouth from Bredon*, photoetching
(from Emerson, *Wild Life on a Tidal Water*, London 1890, plate XXX)



George Davison *The Onion Field* 1890, photogravure
(Royal Photographic Society)



Frank Eugene Nirvana, glycerine print
(from Cullin, *Photography as a fine art*, 1901)



Frank Eugene *Adam and Eve*, gum print
(from *Camerawork* n XXX, 1910, Royal Photographic Society)



A L Coburn *Vortograph n 27*
(Royal Photographic Society)

16 graphed with a neo-primitive pinhole camera, caused a sensation in 1890, brought the French impressionists into the debate.³ The next generation of American pictorialists (Coburn, Stieglitz) responded positively to cubism and the onset of modernism, whereas their mainstream British counterparts certainly did not. The virulence of all these ephemeral polemics, for and against 'crazy-quilters' and 'gum-jugglers', fuzzography vs straight prints, British vs American 'Links', etc.,⁴ obviously reflects their disavowed dependence on painting for the terms of debate.

The underlying problem was how to establish a distinct identity for photography without blurring the line with painting, etching or other established media, on the one hand, and, on the other, without falling back into photography of record. The conservatives, like Robinson or Horsley Hinton, seemed too close to painting with their combined prints; the radicals, like Demachy or Frank Eugene, seemed too close with their gum prints, which showed the marks of 'intervention' with brush or needle.⁵ (Eugene scratched directly on the print.) The pure photographer tried to stick to the 'straight' print, guarantee of 'photographicity', so to speak, but consequently risked missing out on art altogether. Hence the need for the Dallmeyer lens, diffused focus, flat tones, deep shadows, rough paper and all the other characteristics of the epoch.

During the 1910s the pictorialist paradigm began to crack. It moved, however, not towards greater intervention, but towards less. The straight print triumphed, shedding at the same time its *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic pretensions and overcoming its resistance to photography of record. Not only was the gum process rejected but also softness, darkness, blurriness and *flou* altogether. Following the crucial innovations of Strand and Sheeler, ambitious photography accepted illumination and sharpness. The way was cleared by the new machine aesthetic of modernism, which gave fresh

3 Originally titled *The Old Farmstead*. Davison used sheet-metal punched with a small hole instead of a lens. Gernsheim, in his classic *Creative Photography* (London, 1962) writing from a 'New Objectivity' standpoint, denounces Davison almost as virulently as he does Robinson.

4 The best account of these bitter quarrels – for and against the gum process which allowed 'intervention', for and against combination printing, for and against diffused focus, for and against innovation in painting and photography, and so on, is John Taylor's introduction to *Pictorial Photography in Britain*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1978. For a change, Taylor writes with sympathy both for pictorialism and for the conservative 'British' trends within it, a sign of a swing of the pendulum away from the dogmas of naturalism and the straight print as well as modernist influences and ideas.

5 For Demachy's own spirited polemics, see Bill Jay's *Robert Demachy* (London, 1974) which reprints a number of his essays as well as a limited selection of photographs. Demachy developed Whistlerian effects in the direction of Carrière. For Frank Eugene, see C H Caffin's *Photography as a Fine Art*, New York, 1901.

confidence to the photographer and validated clarity and precision. In New York, following Stieglitz's propaganda work for cubism and the arrival of Picabia and Duchamp, pictorialism transmuted into a new modernist photography of geometrical compositions, machine forms, hard-edge design and clear delineation of detail.⁶

Paul Strand, the most influential innovator of the time, invoked explicitly Kantian categories to explain how he was striving to effect a reunion of machine and science with spirit and art. Writing in the avant-garde periodical *Broom* in 1922 he concluded:

'And so it is again the vision of the artist, of the intuitive seeker after knowledge, which, in this modern world, has seized upon the mechanisms and materials of a machine, and is pointing the way . . . In thus disinterestedly experimenting, the photographer has joined the ranks of all true seekers after knowledge, be it intuitive and aesthetic or conceptual and scientific. He has, moreover, in establishing his own spiritual control over a machine, the camera, revealed the destructive and wholly fictitious wall of antagonism which these two groups have built up between themselves.'

Strand ends by calling for the integration of science and expression, lest they develop each unilaterally into 'the destructive tool of materialism' or else 'anemic phantasy'.⁷

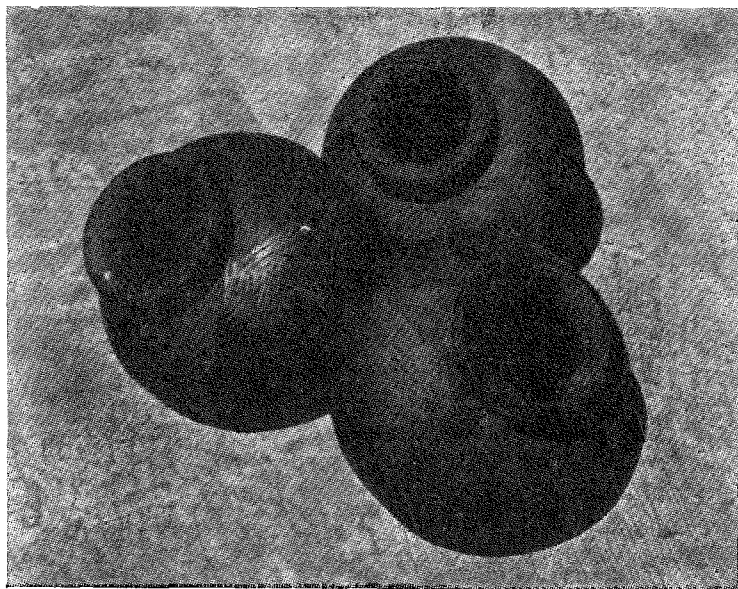
Photography's new mission, then, was to heal the breach between science and art, concept and intuition. Instead of a wall between photography of record and pictorial photography, the two were to be integrated. Sharp focus and full light were to be combined with the new post-cubist principles of composition, guaranteed by Plato's *Philebus*.⁸ The Kantian distinction between abstract and concrete could be circumvented. Later Edward Weston, who consolidated Strand's innovations and was the most influential among ambitious photographers in the 1920s and 1930s in America, noted that all Brancusi's abstract forms were 'already existing in nature' and that 'an idea, just as abstract as could be conceived by sculptor or painter, can be expressed through 'objective' recording with the camera, because nature has everything that can possibly be imagined by the artist: and the camera, controlled by wisdom,

6 There are a number of works with material on Stieglitz and his multifarious activities – his journals, his galleries, his propaganda and polemic, his 'circle'. Among the most interesting are Bram Dijkstra's *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (Princeton, 1969) and Dickran Tashjian's *Skyscraper Primitives* (Wesleyan, 1975) which deal with Stieglitz's role in the introduction of first cubism and then dadaism to the United States.

7 *Broom* v3 n4, 1922, reprinted in Lyons, op cit. *Broom* was always eager to hail the destiny of American art alongside American technology.

8 In the *Philebus*, Plato praises shapes and solids 'produced by a lathe or a carpenter's rule and square from the straight and the round'. Stieglitz liked and used this quote. Dijkstra (op cit) comments on Stieglitz and Plato in different terms.

- 18 goes beyond statistics'.⁹ What we have here is a naturalistic Platonism. Forms and essences are available to perception – concealed within nature but discoverable by wisdom, by the seer.



Edward Weston *Tres Ollas de Oaxaca* 1926

Weston chose his subject matter for its formal and tonal qualities. He photographed jars, peppers, roots, kelp, sand-dunes, nudes, with the same relentlessly aestheticizing eye. His preferred genres were still-life, landscape and nude stripped of any picturesque or erotic overtones. In a way, this recession of subject matter, paring down and asceticism of signifieds, doomed Weston to being a photographer's photographer. More public fame went to those like Walker Evans and Cartier-Bresson who combined the Weston aesthetic with human interest. Evans would find a post-cubist composition in a sharecropper's hovel (geometrical lines of planks, chair, broom-handle and doorpost) but guard against the impersonality of Weston's vision by allowing a touch of dishevelment, a hint of human presence. Similarly, Cartier-Bresson, trained by the cubist painter Lhote, became a news photographer and learned to

9 Weston often returns, in his *Daybooks* (New York, 1973), written during the twenties and thirties, to the differences between and supremacy of photography over painting (for him, the objects of the *paragone* were Duchamp, Picasso and Brancusi, on the one hand, and himself on the other). Weston's co-worker, Tina Modotti, attempted to give his style of photography a political message, till she abandoned photography to become a professional revolutionary.

use human presence, as E H Gombrich remarks, 'to give a touch of animation to the geometrical relationships he discovers in his motifs'.¹⁰ 19

The goal of these photographers was to start with 'factual testimony' and then 'distil the essence' from each fact (Cartier-Bresson's phrases). Weston or his European equivalent, Renger-Patzsch, were interested in objects and their 'object-ness'; Cartier-Bresson was more concerned with events – the instant as condensation of the event, the event itself as condensation of a life or an age. Clearly the 'ideas' which concern them are something like Kant's 'aesthetic ideas' rather than 'rational ideas', something also like 'concrete universals'. The fact that the camera is a machine hardly makes photography more scientific; it simply substitutes discovery for invention in the traditional categories of classical aesthetics. (When the straight print is abandoned, invention returns – even before, to a degree, with manipulation of lighting or exposure). The importance of discovery leads in turn to homilies by successful photographers on concentration, perseverance, speed of reaction, opportunism (combined with reticence), creative reverie, patience, luck (or Zen Buddhism), and so on.

The time when an aesthetic of photography as art finally crystallized was also the time when Walter Benjamin began to think and write about photography. Benjamin virulently attacked Renger-Patzsch and the associated 'New Objectivity' school of photography for making the world artistic rather than art mundane. He saw more clearly than most the dangers of the new cult of the beautiful or significant detail because he himself was obsessed by the significance of detail, and, in a way, its beauty. Benjamin developed a method based on his own concept of the 'dialectical image' for which he drew both on his mixed collaboration-cum-running battle with Adorno and on his own idiosyncratic interpretation of surrealism. Benjamin wanted objects, isolated by their oddity, to reveal historic and social determinations when juxtaposed and accumulated, yet – as Adorno complained – without any mediating theory.¹¹

Not surprisingly the photographer who most fascinated Benjamin

10 Gombrich bestows his praise on Cartier-Bresson in the Scottish Arts Council catalogue, Edinburgh, 1978. He concludes his essay with the succinct statement, 'He is a true humanist'.

11 Walter Benjamin wrote frequently about photography. See especially his: *A Short History of Photography*, Screen v13 n1, Spring 1972; *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and *The Author as Producer*, collected in *Illuminations*, London and New York, 1968. For an account of the controversy with Adorno see *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* by Susan Buck-Morss, London and New York, 1977, and *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, 1977. For a convenient history of New Objectivity, see John Willett's *The New Sobriety – Art and Politics in the Weimar Period 1917-33*, London, 1978.

20 was Atget. Atget appealed to his pervasive nostalgia and melancholy, to his mania for collecting, to his fascination with shop-windows, to his cult for the *flâneur*, his love of Paris, his demand not to overlook, his taste for the astonishing amid the banal. As has often been pointed out, there is something materialist about this, but also something mystical, something Proustian, seeking in surrealism the paradoxical merger of Baudelaire and Brecht. The rediscovery of Atget, by Man Ray, Berenice Abbott¹² and the surrealists in general, was at first the rediscovery of a new Douanier Rousseau, a Sunday photographer, who was himself as overlooked and obsolete as the flashes of the nineteenth-century his labour had permitted to survive. But the impact of Atget's work went far beyond this.

Atget is another type of example of the way in which art and record could be integrated. He was not interested in perfection of composition or print like Weston. Nonetheless he provided a way of seeing aesthetic value where none had been suspected. Not, of course, the fundamentally classicising values which Weston revealed in a vegetable, thereby transformed from a familiar instrumental object to a de-familiarised expressive object, but values which reflected a reversal of taste, an unprecedented mode of aestheticisation which surrealism introduced and popularised. Benjamin misunderstood this. He saw Atget as a profane photographer – indeed he even likens his work to police investigatory photographs – who stripped the aura from Paris street-scenes where Renger-Patzsch conferred it on gas-pipes or beech logs alike. Yet like so much that Benjamin said about 'aura' (a topic about which he changed his mind radically) it seems he was wildly mistaken. New developments in photography entailed the construction of a new type of aura, unforeseen by Benjamin, and indeed one which he perhaps played his part in summoning forth.

One of the most interesting of the theses in Susan Sontag's book *On Photography* is her description of how recent American photography has displayed a surrealist taste for the obsolete, marginal and bizarre. (In fact she tends to read this taste back into the original tenets of surrealism, which leads to a certain amount of one-sidedness at times). She links this new surrealism with the theme of America itself, so dominant in US photography since Stieglitz and continued by Walker Evans, Robert Frank and others. She traces the way America ceased to be seen as noble and became instead sort of tacky, but terrific. Instead of the world is beautiful, America is terrific – and its terrificness consists of its phantasmagoric tackiness. A key quote here is Diane Arbus's remark¹³ about a

12 Berenice Abbott, *The World of Atget*, Horizon, USA, 1964 (reprint).

13 Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (London and New York, 1977) pivots on a chapter critical of Arbus. On the subject of photography Sontag

nudist camp she went to in 1963: 'It was the seediest camp and 21
for that reason, for some reason, it was also the most terrific.
It was really falling apart'.



Diane Arbus *Puerto Rican woman with beauty mark, NYC 1965*

Arbus's photographs are located at a particularly unsettling point in the imaginary, the verge of not wanting to know. She travels further into the interior than most of us want to, to a region where report begins to become confessional. Yet, over and over, she photographs masks, costumes, façades, poses – as though imminent disclosure must be warded off. She will not allow misery the humanistic comfort of nobility or the discomfort of scandal, but hovers in the interzone of numbness. This attitude is not truly surrealist. There is none of the convulsiveness which Breton demanded in *Nadja*. (It's worth noting perhaps that, though *Nadja* contains many photographs, there is no portrait of *Nadja*. The main influence is Atget).¹⁴ Talking about Kafka, Wolfgang Kayser

is even more 'saturnine' and pessimistic than Benjamin. The Arbus quote is from *Diane Arbus*, Gordon Fraser, London, 1973.

¹⁴ Two surrealists were active as photographers: J A Boiffard and Man Ray. Boiffard took the famous photograph of a big toe for Bataille.

22 speaks of 'cold grotesques' and the phrase seems appropriate to Arbus too.¹⁵ Indeed she was an admirer of Kafka. But unlike Kafka her world is one of *objets trouvés*, faces/masks scavenged from the aftermath of trauma and placed on display.

Arbus's success depends not simply on a return to photography of record but a radical refusal of even a modernist pictorialism ('I hate the idea of composition'). Pictorialism began by separating itself off from record, then tried to integrate itself, finally found itself cast adrift as a new aesthetic became dominant, derived from the surrealist concern with found objects and chance encounters, but embodying a different 'cool' ideological approach, shorn of surrealism's fundamentally passionate romanticism. Early and even New Objectivity pictorialism went into eclipse. In their place the nineteenth century provided a rich lode of early news and documentary photographs, now interpreted in a new aesthetic light, reinforced by a powerful sense of nostalgia. Sontag likens this to the high romantic cult of ruins – not, however, the imposing ruins of the great monuments, but tiny shards and fragments of everyday life.

One result of the fragmentariness implicit in this aesthetic of photography has been to encourage the exhibition of suites of photographs. This trend too can be traced back to Atget. In the 1920s suites were produced by Blossfeldt (plant forms), Krull (metallurgy) and Sander (a physiognomic taxonomy of the German people) and praised as such by Benjamin, who saw in their work, especially Sander's, the beginnings of a systematic, quasi-scientific approach to perception. Whereas Krull or Arbus produce a suite of variations on a theme (guarantee, as Sontag points out, of *auteur*-hood) Sander at least aimed at an exhaustive inventory.¹⁶ Yet this hardly goes beyond an elementary positivism, an accumulation of facts (saved by a certain picturesqueness and visual fascination) whose classification is completely predetermined. Sander's portraits are exemplification of a social analysis which precedes them and is in no way made explicit by them. They hardly seem to justify Benjamin's optimistic approval.

Benjamin, of course, was searching for a way in which photo-

15 Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grottesque*, Indiana, 1963. Kayser argues that 'the official theory of surrealism ultimately rejected the quest for the grotesque'. Perhaps we should agree too with the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo who commented, in an interview in *Cameravork* n3, on Breton's assertion that Mexico was a surrealist country: 'That is what Breton says. In fact, Mexico can be a dramatic country, a country full of contrasts, even bordering on the fantastic, which does not precisely fit in the concept of surrealism which like any other 'ism' is an academic term'.

16 See: the monograph *August Sander*, Gordon Fraser, London 1977; *Anlitz der Zeit*, introduction by Alfred Döblin, first published by Kurt Wolff, Berlin 1929, republished by Schirmer/Mosel, Munich 1973.

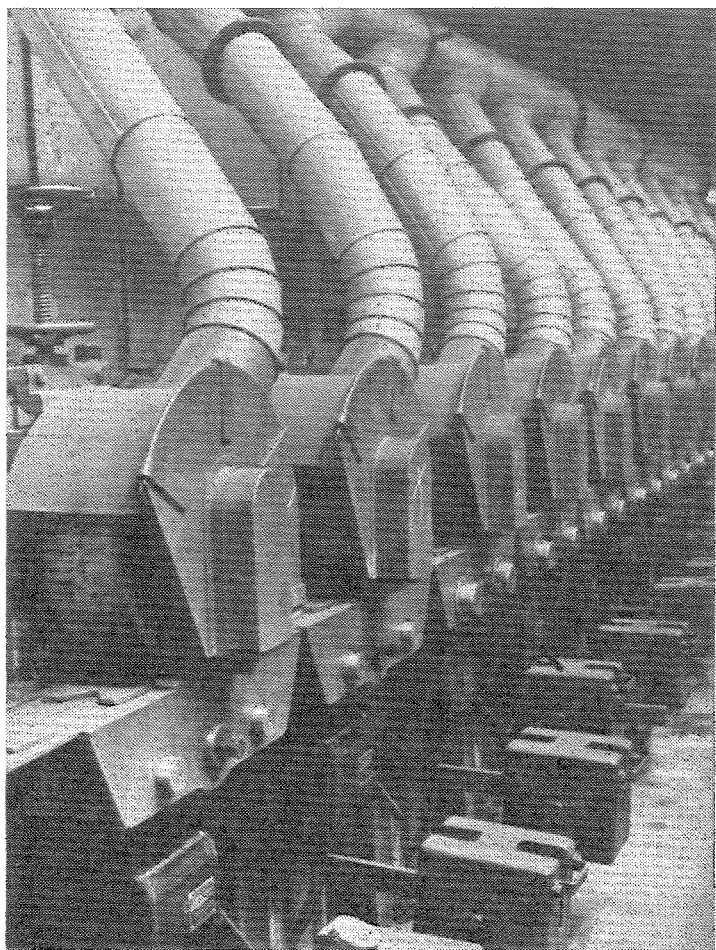
graphy might produce knowledge as well as become an art. New Objectivity was simply aestheticizing; a documentary photograph of the Krupp works, in Brecht's well-known words, did not yield much information about Krupp as a firm, about its place in the economic and political structure of Germany, the exploitation of its workers, and so on.¹⁷ As well as Atget and Sander, he also praised photo-montage and insisted on the importance of words in relation to photography, particularly captions. It is interesting that Barthes too has laid a lot of stress on the caption as a means of anchoring the significance of a photograph.¹⁸ Sontag, however, is sceptical. Photographs, she thinks, tend to over-run their captions and avant-garde photography has always remained marginal.

Benjamin was right, I think. Like all the most progressive artists and theorists of our century, he was trying to hold and develop a line between Lessing and Wagner,¹⁹ between a purism which believes that the practice of an art must be determined by its specific essence and a holism which sought an integration of different media and semiotic systems on a basis of mutual reinforcement and support. In photography, the path of Lessing has been trodden by the pictorialists, seeking a self-sufficient art photography true to its own nature, and that of Wagner by advertising photography where image and verbal language have been integrated. Benjamin turned instead towards press photography – yet perhaps, this was not a true alternative, but rather a compromise, in which word and

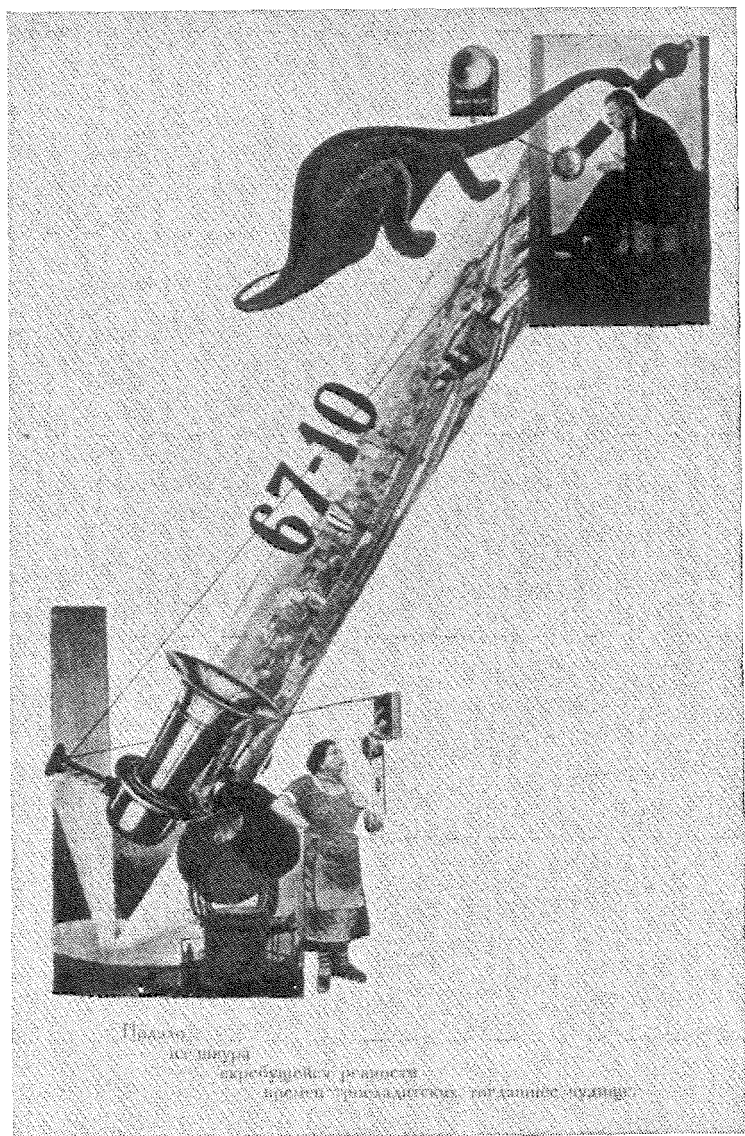
17 Brecht's remark is quoted by Benjamin in *The Author as Producer*, op cit. There is a strong animus against photography in almost all marxist aesthetics – Adorno and Lukacs are united on this point – apparently because it is connected with naturalism, with Zola rather than either Balzac or the avant-garde. It is interesting that Eisenstein is almost alone among marxists in defending Zola.

18 Barthes's other contribution to discourse on photography is the concept of 'connotation'. However, he uses different explanatory schemas for this concept in *Mythologies*; *The Elements of Semiology* and *Système de la Mode* all of which are digested and regurgitated as yet another, this time very different, type of schema in *S/Z*. Barthes's original model, Hjelmslev, uses the concept to cover what we would normally think of as the categories of a stylistics. Barthes himself seems to mean by 'connotation' something like an intension exemplified in a text (ie 'connotation' in J S Mill's sense but re-deployed within a borrowed Hjelmslevian framework, emptied of Hjelmslev's own 'purport'). However, this notion, even re-interpreted as above, remains impressionistic.

19 John Berger argues, in his *Selected Essays and Articles* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972), that photography, contrary to what one might expect, is more concerned with time than space, in that it primarily represents an instant, abstracted from a narrative event the spectator constructs (or which is constructed for one by a caption). Perhaps this is an over-generalization from the news or documentary photograph, but in any case this characteristic of photography need not be seen as essential. As for Wagner, unlike film, photographs are rarely accompanied by music, so any integration is relatively less than total. Though of the use of slides in some concerts and performances.



A Renger-Patzsch *Hamburg* c 1926
(from *Die Welt ist Schön*, Munich 1928)



A Rodchenko Photomontage for 'Pro Eto' 1923

26 image remained spatially separate and simply complemented each other in role and meaning. Either the caption located what the photograph was of, its indexical referent, or else commented on or elaborated its sense as a quasi-predicate.²⁰ Moreover, there was a clear hierarchy between press photograph and caption.

Nonetheless already in the 1920s avant-garde photography was pointing the way towards new concepts of photography.²¹ Heartfield's photo-montages are well-known, although, as John Berger points out they often fall into a pattern of stylized rhetoric. Soviet montages for books and exhibitions were in many ways more complex. The collapse of easel painting among the Russian avant-garde led to a shift of interest towards photography, which partly transferred Bauhaus and New Objectivity concerns to the Soviet Union, but partly too went beyond this – for instance, in Rodchenko's montages which accompany Mayakovsky's poem *Pro Eto* or Lissitsky's *Pressa* exhibit in Cologne. Here photographs are themselves being used as material within complex constructions in relation to heterogeneous texts. This had three effects. First, it destroyed the aura of the photographs, by cropping and relocating them. Second, it structured their juxtaposition, rather than presenting them simply as a suite. Thirdly, it placed them *vis-à-vis* words in a way which could not be understood simply as 'illustration' or 'caption'.

These uses of photography in art, typical of avant-garde work in the 1920s, did not prosper long. As with Eisenstein and Vertov, Rodchenko and Lissitsky were forced to adapt to a new climate after the promulgation of socialist realism. Indeed, as is well-known, by the mid-forties there was hardly an avant-garde artist left in Europe still working. Those who had not converted or accommodated to conservative or official forms of art, were either dead, or in exile, or silent. It was not until the 1960s that anything

20 Emerson remarks that photographs of record (faces, buildings, landscapes) 'always require a name. It is a photograph of *Mr Jones*, of *Mont Blanc*, or of the *Houses of Parliament*. On the other hand, a work of Art really requires *no name* – it speaks for itself' (in Lyons, op cit) C S Peirce remarked on the indexical nature of photography, seeming to consider the photograph itself as a quasi-predicate and the object or event it was of, its quasi-subject. For a more modern treatment of a similar issue, see David Kaplan's *Quantifying In* in Leonard Linsky's *Reference and Modality*, Oxford, 1971, which is particularly interesting on portraits.

21 See Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, London, 1976, and Robert A Sobieszek's articles in *Artforum*, September and October issues, 1978. See also Alexander Rodtschenko, *Fotografien 1920-1938*, Köln, 1978, and Sophie Lissitsky-Kuppers's classic *El Lissitsky*, London, 1968. John Berger (op cit) has written an interesting essay on photomontage and, for an excellent account contemporary with Benjamin's, see Harry Alan Potamkin's 1931 essay, added to the 1931 edition of Frank Fraprie and Walter Woodbury's *Photographic Amusements*, Boston. For German work, less well-known than Heartfield's, there is Emilie Bertonati's *Das Experimentelle Photo in Deutschland 1918-1940*, München, 1978, as well as Franz Roh's essential *Photo-eye*, Stuttgart, 1929.

resembling the richness and energy of the 1920s was able to re-emerge. It was at this time that rifts at last began to appear in the hegemonic version of modernism which acquired official status in the USA soon after the end of the war. The breakdown of this official modernism has been widely seen as a slackening, perhaps even collapse of avant-gardism. In fact it represents a revival.²² In our 'post-modernist' epoch there has, as one would expect, been an immense interest in photography and, especially significant, a renaissance of avant-garde photography.

In the USA this has taken the form of a revival of interest in the use of photographic material in painting (Rauschenberg, Warhol), in a more radical interest in series photography, partly triggered by the rediscovery of Muybridge, and by the development of narrative photography, as in the work of Duane Michals and Michael Snow.²³ In Europe there have been parallel developments, often associated with various art tendencies and movements rather than directly with photography (Dibbets, the Bechers, Fulton, Long). But, more significantly, there has also been a movement toward engagement with the semiotic systems of 'popular' or 'mass' commercial photographer – film – still, fashion and advertising photography, postcard, photo-novel. One example of this, of course, is the Godard-Gorin film, *Letter to Jane*. In Britain there are photographic works by Victor Burgin, David Dye, Alexis Hunter, Sarah McCarthy, John Stezaker, Marie Yates and others, which mark a crucial new direction for photography as/in/against art.²⁴

Instead of seeing art photography as something quite separate from commercial photography or integrated with elements of it,

22 The category of 'modernism' has increasingly been captured by those who see twentieth-century art primarily in terms of reflexivity, ontological exploration, and so on. In this context, the category 'avant-garde' is best reserved for works which prolong and deepen the historic 'rupture' of cubism.

23 For an interesting sample of recent American photography, see *(photo) (photo)² . . . (photo)³*, the catalogue of an exhibition of 'sequenced photographs' at the University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1975.

24 For an overview of recent British photography, see *Time, Words, and the Camera*, edited by Jasia Reichardt, Graz, 1976.

— For Victor Burgin's photographic work see *Work and Commentary*, Latimer New Directions, London 1973; *Victor Burgin*, Van Abbe-museum, Eindhoven 1977; *Family*, Printed Matter Inc, New York 1977; *English Art Today 1960-76*, British Council/Commune di Milano, Milan 1976, pp 361-367 and *passim*. *Hayward Annual '77*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1977 pp 82-85.

— For David Dye see *English Art Today*, op cit pp 368-373 and *passim*.
 — For Alexis Hunter see *Hayward Annual '78*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1978, pp 38-40.

— For John Stezaker see *Fragments*, The Photographers Gallery, London 1978.

The work of Mary Kelly provides a related instance of the rigorous non-use of photography.

28 they work on commercial photography as 'reference text' to be transformed, repositioned and criticized, implicitly or explicitly. This is not simply 'de-construction' but rather a process of 're-production' which involves a disorientation and reorientation of the spectator in which new signifieds are superimposed disturbingly on the memories/anticipations of old presuppositions. Moreover, this work is very varied – use of caption (Burgin), point of view and frame (Stezaker), narrative sequence (McCarthy), are all subject to investigation and 're-production'. Attention too is being directed not toward photography either as 'fact' or 'vision', but photography as 'fiction' and 'drama'.

This new area, new aesthetic problematic, of and for photography, allows us to reformulate the questions with which this essay began. For photography to be an art involves reformulating notions of art, rejecting both material and formal purism and also the separation of 'art' from 'commerce' as distinct semiotic practices which never interlock. Photography is not an 'art-in-itself' any more than film, but an option within an inter-semiotic and inter-textual 'arena'.²⁵ Similarly, it is not fated to provide 'mere information', though its indexicality is part of its power, but neither can it provide scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge, except of course within the specific practices of science itself.²⁶ Photography, within art, can, however, re-open the closed questions of ideological reading and understanding, the symbiosis of information with blocked knowledge and balked desire. In this sense, it opens up paths which make the production of new knowledge elsewhere more possible. Re-inscription, discontinuity and heterogeneity, caught though they themselves may be in the imaginary, make possible by displacement unsuspected changes in the symbolic.

25 These remarks also apply to film, where purism of a 'modernist' type is much more strongly entrenched. As outlined above, photographic purism has gravitated towards a 'Bazin' rather than 'Sharits' aesthetic. It's interesting to note how a film 'materialist-purist' like Peter Gidal, if that's the right designation, uses still photography in *Copenhagen* 1936 in contrast with, say Godard-Gorin, or McCall and Tyndall's *Argument*, as though the aesthetics and politics of photographic signifieds were relatively unproblematical.

26 In talking about 'knowledge' I am assuming the possibility of historical epistemologies, which would include concepts of 'reference', 'data', 'experiment', and so on. The place of an empirical component in the production of knowledge is, of course, historically determinate and not absolute. I assume that 'knowledge' may be of different types and orders, of which 'scientific knowledge' is only one category. Art, though it may make use of various forms of 'knowledge', scientific included, perhaps produces a reordering and re-categorizing of the thought-materials and epistemological components necessary to the production of new knowledge elsewhere.

The discursive and the ideological in film Notes on the conditions of political intervention

Colin MacCabe

Definitions

The term 'discourse' has been of crucial importance in *Screen's* recent work as well as in a variety of theoretical and political analyses. But if it is much used, it is also much abused, and if the term was introduced to avoid a number of specific theoretical commitments, it now so often appears in justifications of those very same commitments that it is necessary to spell out in some detail what is at stake when one chooses to employ the word 'discourse' instead of words such as 'theory', 'speech', or 'intention', to mention only a few of the terms that discourse may replace.

As a first stage in clarifying the theoretical issues, it will be useful to consider what 'evidences' it displaced together with one of the definitions which it has been given within linguistics, the study from which the term has often been imported. It will then be possible to consider its importance within the analysis of film and its contribution to an understanding of the relations between politics and film.

One influential use of 'discourse' has been at the service of an attack on logicist theories of science. These logicist epistemologies understand the structure of scientific theories to correspond (according to various rules) to a pre-existent order. For such a logicism, a theory is reducible to its ideal logic independently of its order of exposition because that logic is guaranteed by a reality external to the theory. To counter such arguments and to stress the effectivity of theory, 'discourse', with its emphasis on the order of exposition, was used to replace 'theory', a term tied to logicist conceptions of science. Hindess and Hirst make the point succinctly:

30 'Throughout this text we refer to theory as theoretical *discourse*. why do we use this term? Theoretical discourses we shall define as the construction of problems for analysis and solutions to them by means of concepts. Concepts are deployed in ordered successions to produce these effects. This order is the order created by *the practice of theoretical work itself*: it is guaranteed by no necessary "logic" or "dialectic" nor by any necessary mechanism of correspondence with the real itself. Theoretical work proceeds by constant problematizations and reconstructions. Theories only exist as *discourses* – as concepts in definite orders of succession producing definite effects (posing, criticising, solving problems) – as a result of that order. Theoretical discourse, like discourse in general, speaking and writing, is an unlimited process. Classically, in epistemologies, theories have an appropriate form of order in which their relation to the real is revealed. They appropriate, correspond to or are falsified by the real. The limits of nature set their limits. Theory ultimately represents and is limited by the order of the real itself. In empiricist epistemologies, for example, theories take the form of categories translatable into definite observation statements. Our conception of discourse cannot be so limited.' (Barry Hindess and Paul Q Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation*, London 1977, pp 7-8.)

The other major use of 'discourse' has been in a variety of writings on language which have been concerned to call into question the Saussurean concept of *parole*, the individual messages which the systematic regularities of *langue* make possible. In the differential definition of *langue*, no reference is made to the speaking subject, but this same subject reappears in the definition of *parole*, which presupposes the traditional subject of idealism, both self-constituted and unitary. Such a psychologism ignores our plural and contradictory constitution in language and it does so by ignoring the various institutional sites of language-use. If we consider the site of language-use as constituting a provisional corpus (a discourse), we can then investigate systematic regularities above the level of *langue*. Individual statements are not then considered simply in relation to *langue* but in relation to the discourse in which they are formulated. The individual speaking subject is thus displaced across the range of discourses in which he or she participates.¹

These considerations enable us to understand how 'discourse' is

¹ It is the work of Michel Pecheux which has provided the most thoroughgoing attempt to produce both a theory and analysis of discourse. In the monograph *Analyse automatique du discours*, Paris 1969, Pecheux elaborates a method for processing linguistic statements in order then to submit them to an analysis of discursive processes, this discursive level of the analysis supposedly capturing the different subject positions produced within discourses. In this early work Pecheux pre-

aimed at attesting to systematic realities of language over and above the reality of *langue*. Just as Saussure was concerned to avoid considerations of reference or intention in his definition of *langue*, 'discourse' tries to emphasise the systematic regularities at work within specific corpuses, regularities which find their reality independently of an imaginary real of an imaginary subject. To avoid these two major 'evidences' of common sense (language is obviously at the service of the speaker, on the one hand, and reality, on the other), more than a word is required and it is all too easy to lapse into a formalism complicit with the logicism that it seeks to escape, or a sociology which merely substitutes a collective subject for an individual one. Some of the problems involved are evident in Zellig Harris' famous article 'Discourse Analysis'² which was concerned to indicate regularities of language above the level of the sentence but to specify these regularities independently of 'meanings' which would place their determinations outside language. Harris specifies the articulations of the discourse by means of a distributional analysis which identifies items in terms of a similarity of context. Although this method offers a certain promise of indicating actual orders within a discourse and thus the possibility of distinguishing between discourses, it is condemned to an arid formalism by its refusal to constitute the corpus as an individual text. This constraint effectively ignores the problem of how discourses both produce, and are produced from, subject positions. It is necessary to elaborate a non-subjective theory of enunciation able to grasp the institutional site of a discourse, its imaginary coherence, and its real unity as a particular set of articulations which produce specific subject-positions. To establish this distance be-

supposes an homology between discourses and institutions, the institutional site providing the initial definition of the corpus of statements to be analysed. In a later work, written with the linguist Catherine Fuchs, 'Mises au point et perspectives à propos de l'analyse automatique du discours', *Langages* n37, March 1975, pp 7-81. Pecheux criticises his earlier approach for failing to make an adequate distinction between the imaginary unity of the institutional site of the discourse and the real unity produced by discursive formations. The substitution of the notion of discursive formation for discourse emphasises that there can be no simple one to one homology between institution and discourse - there can be no method of counting the number of discourses or ideologies within a given social formation (*ibid*, pp 12-13). The analysis will always depend on the political and ideological struggles imbricated with the different discursive formations. The fundamental problems of Pecheux's project are not at issue in this article, important as they are for the theory of ideology (a non-technical overview is to be found in Pecheux's own *Les Vérités de la Palice*, Paris 1974). All that needs to be retained for the purpose of this article is that 'discourse' has been the term chosen to attempt to understand language in relation to the production of particular subject positions. It should be noted that this choice is not confined to marxists but ranges over a variety of positions on the relation between social formation and language.

2 Z Harris 'Discourse Analysis', *Language* 1952, pp 1-30.

32 tween imaginary and real, one needs an analysis which can identify the other ideological practices with which the discourse is imbricated but also the specific effectivity of the discursive itself. Such an analysis will displace the division between form and content to grasp the form in the content and the content in the form.

Cinema and Discourse

This brief introduction has served to indicate how discourse functions as a term which can hold at one and the same time both articulation and position, the articulation of a position. It is thus scarcely surprising that the term has figured so largely in a project to understand and transform the ideological functioning of cinema. This project does not understand cinema to have an ideological function determined by its representational relation to other ideological, political and economic struggles. Rather it is concerned with interrogating the conditions of existence of that representational relation, conditions which are ideological, political and economic but which are also specifically discursive for, as Stephen Heath writes: 'representation is in turn a matter of discourse, of the organization of the images, the definition of the "views", their construction. It is the discursive operations that decide the work of a film' (*Screen* v17 n3, pp 73-74).

Heath's two articles, 'Narrative Space' (*ibid*) and 'Notes on Suture' (*Screen* v18 n4,) attempt to specify the discursive conditions of classic narrative cinema and the possibility of their transformation. Both articles are concerned to establish the relation between articulation and address in the cinema. The earlier piece emphasises that the compositional rules of classic narrative cinema find their justification in the production of a coherent field of vision for the spectator, a coherence which is produced by the articulation of narrative and shot. The construction of such a space cannot, however, be given in terms of some specifiable formal features, the necessity of understanding the articulation of the shots across the articulation of the narrative entails that the ideological is already deployed within the discursive. Heath writes: 'film is not a static and isolated object but a series of relations with the spectator it imagines, plays and sets as subject in its movement' (*Screen* v17 n3, p 97). The insistence on the importance of the specific address for an understanding of the articulation of the cinema, indeed their indivisibility, is stressed in the article on suture: 'The realisation of cinema as discourse is the production at every moment through the film of a subject address, the specification of the play of incompleteness-completion' (*Screen* v18 n4, pp 63-64).

If we understand discourse as the term for the relation between

articulation and address and the theoretical necessity of insisting on this relation then it is possible to understand also certain of the problems posed by Paul Willemen's article 'Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Bránigan's "Subjectivity under Siege"' in *Screen* v19 n1. 33

For the purposes of the discussion here I am not concerned with the particular polemic of that article but rather with a position on cinema, discourse and politics which informs certain sections of Willemen's argument. If much of the text is devoted to a valuable discussion which casts doubt on any simple move from text to spectator by demonstrating how such a move depends on an elision of the subject of the enunciation of the discourse with the characters articulated within the discourse (for an earlier, if inadequate, consideration of these problems see my 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure' in *Screen* v17 n3, pp 24-27), there is a disturbing tendency for these difficult relations to be resolved by the postulating of an ideological/political space 'outside' the cinema which determines the reading of any particular film. This primacy of the politico-ideological is opposed by Willemen to an academicist formalism – the target of the polemic. Formalism, in this account, constructs hypostatized texts outside the social process. The relations within a text are held to determine its reading, such a determination always requiring the underpinning of a theory of communication. Willemen accuses this formalism of cutting the text off from the ideological and social practices in which it is articulated, and argues that the conditions of the reading of a text are always dependent on specific conjunctures:

'A "progressive reading" is not one that attributes "progressive meanings" to a given text, but a reading that attacks or displaces other readings which function as blockages in the struggle to bring about changes in the social formation. In this sense, the accuracy, the precision of a reading is always conditional upon a recognition of its place and effects within a given (fragment of the) socio-historical conjuncture. The production of readings, and hence of criticism and theory, is always a more or less well calculated intervention in the "battle of ideas", in the ideological formation which provides the battleground' (ibid, p 57).

Willemen here runs together the production of readings of film and 'the struggle to bring about changes in the social formation'. The problem with such a position is that the discursive organization of the film is allowed no reality except for its articulation within other, political discourses. It might be thought that this position is in contradiction with the assertion of a fundamental difference in the textual organization of the Oshima and Fellini films that Willemen discusses (ibid, p 42). However, it is necessary for Willemen to pose such a fundamental difference in order to

34 give any content to his notion of 'changes in the social formation'. For, if one abandons the field of political meanings and representations in order to concentrate on the political struggle within the institution of the cinema then it would appear that the appeal to the political/ideological is simply an appeal to consider discourses about the cinema as well as particular films. The argument first of all calls for an understanding of film in terms of politics and then argues that these politics are to be located within discourses about the cinema. It is thus only an apparent paradox that, for the content of his political struggle, Willemen turns to the formalism that he claims to oppose:

'This is not to say that the structural codes isolated and described in conscientious formalist studies of the above-mentioned authors do not exist or do not produce effects, but that codes always operate within ideological configurations which not only assign them a large part of their "signified" but also determine their location in ideological practices' (ibid p 57).

Willemen, in fact, accepts the existence of codes which can be formally identified but argues that such codes only require meaning from the ideological practices in which they are articulated. This position produces a formal definition of the cinema independently of the ideological practices external to it but then places every determination of the cinema in those external ideological practices. As such it reproduces the division between cinema and ideology that the term 'discourse' was concerned to displace. Rather than setting up two separate areas, one must attempt to understand the difficult imbrication which brings together the articulations specific to the cinema (or linguistic discourses) with other ideological practices. This difficulty can be located in the fact that the discursive must be recognized as a definite element in the functioning of the ideological but that the discursive cannot simply be identified independently of other ideological practices. There can be no question of simply dividing the ideological into discursive and non-discursive practices.

Willemen's article both confronts and avoids this difficulty, confronts it in the comments about the relation of the subject of the enunciation to discursive formations and avoids it in the constant assertion of an ideological/political determination of the cinema. The article hesitates between two heterogeneous, not to say mutually exclusive, discourses: an idealist conception of politics, which dominates, particularly in the article's final section, and the outlines of a materialist theory of the subject which functions as a disturbing interloper. It is only if one understands this double movement that one can understand the appeal to the economic in the final sections of his article. Having evacuated any content from the political level to place it in the ideological (in this example the discourses about cinema), Willemen is placed in the dilemma

that there are no criteria for evaluating ideological struggle. In the first part of the final section of his article Willemen offers an increasingly complicated model of ideological struggle in which it becomes difficult to grasp what could possibly define a political intervention except the declaration that it is political. It is in these terms that one could characterize Willemen's position as ideological voluntarism. Lenin's characterization of voluntarism was in terms of a political strategy which ignored the actual conditions of political struggle in favour of an idealized account of that struggle. Similarly Willemen's article, for all its talk of institutions, ignores the specific conditions of ideological struggle, conditions which would include the articulation with the political, in favour of an idealized discourse about the cinema which can be identified with 'the struggle to bring about changes in the social formation'. It is because there is no discussion of the concrete conditions of ideological struggle that Willemen is forced to resurrect the topography of the base/superstructure model in the second part of his final section. The appeal to the economic is necessary to anchor the ideological struggle in definite political terms. Without the reference to the economic, ideological struggle would be given no political content. But this attempt to provide content for ideological struggle produces the recurring problem with all such definitions that ideology is theorized as the misleading representation of the economic real but the operations of that real remain mysteriously outside the workings of ideology. It is this point that is made in Ben Brewster and Elizabeth Cowie's dissenting note appended to the Willemen article (*ibid*, p 69).

Willemen's definition of signifying practices as 'fundamentally ideological' (*ibid*, p 45) and his conception of a discursive formation as conferring an abstract unity on the subject are simply effects of the abandoning of any notion of 'discourse' which would enable one to study the relations of articulation and address in a film. Instead one gets the resurrection of a cinema and its codes determined by political and ideological considerations which are 'outside' the cinema (see the second paragraph on p 43 and *passim*). The use of a spatial metaphor is indicative of the cost of ignoring the reality of discourse. For it is the concept of discourse which enables one to think the operations by which cinema is constantly transforming the outside inside, and that inside a further element in the outside. Classic narrative cinema refers perpetually to an outside which is then pulled into place, into space, through the organization of the spectator's visual field, this organization confirming the reality of the outside inside. What has to be understood is the variable forms of that organisation and those forms do not allow one to pose the text as an object 'outside' ideology nor as an object 'inside' ideology but rather as one of the crucial points of the articulation of the ideological and of the relations between the imaginary and the symbolic on which ideology turns.

36 Two points need to be retained from this argument:

- (1) discourse is not the abstract conferring of coherence on the subject – there are different discursive articulations which produce terms of address in different ways and it is necessary to specify and differentiate these articulations;
- (2) the discursive is not the ideological – it is the effectivity of the signifying practices which is not reducible to the other practices with which it is imbricated in the ideological.

Discourse in Film

Some of these difficult theoretical points can be clarified in the course of a brief analysis of Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975). In his concern to stress the effectivity of the ideological practices 'outside' cinema, Willemen produces an analysis of the art-film which identifies it with the critical discourse that define it:

'The main point I wanted to make in this section is that it is the mode of reading which determines the construction of the art-cinema as a genre. As different readings are produced, so artists change, or, hopefully, disappear altogether. Similarly, as the present dominant discourses are displaced, so will Art-cinema change and disappear, together with the type of films 'betting' on being read as Art' (ibid, p 62).

This argument underestimates the variety of other practices (distribution, finance and so on) which sustain the art film and it contrives to ignore altogether the discursive reality of those films. Altman's films, to take Willemen's example, do not simply 'bet' on being read as art, their functioning produces an address which is determinate. That such an address can be ignored, in a variety of ways, is not the point at issue here.

To analyse *Nashville*, our example, is to understand its concern with politics and sexuality in terms of a placing of the spectator in a position of imaginary knowledge, a placing which is the constant work of the interrelation of narrative and shot. This placing is not the product of definite cinematic codes which derive their significance from their ideological surrounds. On the contrary, *Nashville* articulates American politics and music within the space of cinema and that articulation can only be understood by mobilizing a heterogeneous set of knowledges (both cinematic and ideological) which will provide the specific analysis. Insofar as the knowledges we mobilize are, of necessity, heterogeneous, there can be no question that the reading produced is exhaustive. Between the alternatives of the formalist dream of the reading and the voluntarist nightmare of *my/our* reading, both of which exhaust the film's significance, a materialist reading specifies articulations within the film on determinate grounds. These grounds may be transformed or added to by further developments in the cinema or other ideo-

logical practices.

Nashville, critically acclaimed on its release, follows the fortunes of a disparate group of people in Nashville as the town prepares for a political rally in favour of Hal Philip Walker of the Replacement Party. Nashville is explicitly marked as a synecdoche for America and the film was constantly promoted as Altman's 'distorted vision of this country'.³ In taking the music city of Nashville as its explicit topic, the film immediately constructs an opposition between the visual and the aural in which the one comprehends the other. The film is able to take us behind the scenes (and this movement 'behind the scenes' provides the basic figure of *Nashville*) to demonstrate the reality behind the music we hear on country and western records and the words that we hear in political speeches. But this vision, and it is here one might locate a certain discursive reality specific to art cinema, is explicitly cinematic. The vision offered by the cinema is contrasted, above all, with television. From the earliest moments of its production *Nashville* was conceived as having both a film and a television version and this may be one of the determinants in the heavy marking of the distinction between the cinematic and television. For example, the credits take the form of a television advertisement for the film but end with the words 'now brought to you without commercial interruption', thus marking its difference from television. Altman wished to insist on this difference by having *Nashville* shown on television without commercial breaks.⁴

The film constantly insists on the opposition between the knowledgeable position we occupy as viewer in the cinema compared with the ignorance of the television audience. The equation of cinema with knowledge is what gives point to the guest appearances of Julie Christie and Elliot Gould (both former Altman stars). Immediately recognizable to us, they cannot be identified by the inhabitants of Nashville. And in this distinction between the audience addressed by the film, who know, and the audience represented within it, who don't know, the film gains its imaginary coherence. In its refusal to consider the possibility of the cinema being contaminated by ignorance, the film blocks the production of any knowledge. As knowledge is always already total, all *Nashville* can do is endlessly reconfirm us in a position of imaginary dominance. And if this imaginary dominance goes together with a real subjection then this merely confirms the political apathy which the film is concerned to promote as its direct ideological function. The populist slogans of Hal Philip Walker open the film and punctuate its process. The opening words of the film urge us to 'get involved in politics', but the images which are provided, right down to the

3 Connie Byrne and William O Lopez 'Nashville', *Journal of Popular Film*, v 5 nn 3-4, p 21 and *passim*.

4 *Ibid*, p 15.

38 triumphant moment of imaginary totality at the end of the film, as the camera accomplishes a backward zoom which holds everything in place, assures us that any involvement in politics is useless.

The logic of narrative and shot that establishes us in this position of imaginary knowledge, that places us as spectators in the cinema, is easily demonstrable in the opening minutes of the film. From shots of the Hal Philip Walker campaign van broadcasting to the streets of Nashville, we cut to Haven Hamilton recording in a studio. The scene commences with a slow pan round the studio and there are then a variety of cuts to figures within it. It is into this already ordered space that Opal, the character played by Geraldine Chaplin, stumbles and it is her entrance that initiates a shot/reverse shot sequence which establishes Opal attempting to make sense of a space that has already been articulated for us as spectators. This shot/reverse shot sequence both places us in Opal's position but distances us from her as we already comprehend the space that she doesn't. And this double movement of identification and distancing indicates Opal's place within the film. As the representative of television ('I'm Opal from the BBC'), she functions as our mis-representative in the film. Her inability to see the reality of Nashville confirms the correctness of our vision. When she is ordered out of Hamilton's studio, she is escorted to another in which the camera establishes her place as spectator before cutting into her vision as she gazes at the glass screen behind which Lynnea (Lily Tomlin) is recording with a black gospel choir. The camera has articulated a space in which the glass screen of the recording studio coincides with the screen of the cinema. It is the cinema screen, however, that guarantees the possibility of sight as Opal makes clear on the soundtrack, gushing forth stereotypes about blacks and comparing Lynnea to a missionary. Even when it is in place, television cannot see.

Cinema's ability to make visible what is invisible to television is evident once again in the opening shots of the following scene at Nashville airport. From a long shot of a huge 'Welcome to Nashville' sign there is a cut to a television monitor on which a reporter is describing the scene at the airport. Suddenly the camera pulls back to hold both the monitor and the reporter standing next to it, delivering his piece to camera. It is this superiority to television, the possibility of holding both television image and its production in the frame provided by the cinema, that guarantees the primacy of cinema's vision.

The articulation of narrative and shot in *Nashville* produces a definite address. The production of a unified and dominant position is not abstract but specific. The post-Vietnam sophisticated film-going public is offered an image of the falsity and idiocy of Middle America, an image, which in its superiority to Middle America's television, pulls that sophisticated public into the place that it already occupies: spectator at an Altman movie. Insofar

as this address necessarily presupposes knowledge, it is unable to offer any perspective for change. Insofar as we already know, it is evident that there is nothing we can do. In the discourse that *Nashville* articulates, it is impossible for the populist politics of Hal Philip Walker and the Replacement Party to figure as anything but a theatrical charade behind which (and *Nashville* always takes us behind the scenes) the reality of pork-barrel politics continues. Symptomatic of the film's inability to grasp the discursive reality of politics is the fiction of the Replacement Party. When the populist ideology that Walker represents in the film did become important, during the Carter campaign, it was not in an organization which appeared as a *deus ex machina* but in the Democratic party. To have engaged with the reality of political changes in America would be to lose the comforting position of total knowledge that *Nashville* assumes and reproduces.

The Taviani brothers' *Padre Padrone* (1977) is another film which addresses an art audience in terms of a world beyond that audience's previous comprehension. The film turns around an opposition between the world of the father, the world of a peasant society in which sound but not language is significant and in which men are not differentiated from animals, and the world of the school, where language and communication become possible, where man differentiates himself from animals through his specifically human nature. The film relates the autobiography of a Sardinian peasant, Gavino Ledda, who is forced to leave school and tend his father's sheep at the age of seven. He re-enters the world of school when, as an adult, he joins the Army where a student friend, Cesare, takes up the role of teacher. The movement from the world of animal sound to human language is held narratively by Gavino's experience of music and from the moment when he leaves the father's world of sound, the familial conflict intensifies. The film constructs and then traverses both worlds unproblematically in a movement which turns on the matching of sound to image, a matching which epiphanises the truth of the image. As Gavino's father instructs the boy on the sounds that surround the family land, each sound is provided with an appropriate image, the image thus being revealed in its truth. As Gavino learns the words which make his life as a shepherd communicable, the images of the hills in which he spent his early life return illuminated in their truth. In its assumption of a truth of the image which it is the work of the film to reveal, *Padre Padrone* re-instates the cinema spectator in the place he or she already occupies, a place in which sight and knowledge become one independently of the other practices in which that sight is produced. The result of this assumption of a truth outside specific struggles and argument is that the film evacuates Gavino's story of all specificity so that it becomes the 'truth' of peasant life (the very opposition on which the film turns is merely a 'sympathetic'

40 version of a traditional metropolitan intellectual view of peasants), the 'truth' of father-son relationships (the film lets us 'see' both sides of this tragic human situation), the 'truth' of economic exploitation (the film equates the specific conditions of peasant proprietorship with all capitalist production). To provide the truth of a situation, to represent the essential components of a greater totality, is to deny any possibility of transformation, any reality to struggle. As in *Nashville*, the total knowledge with which we are provided is, by its own very definition, powerless.

In *Padre Padrone*, the opening and closing minutes exemplify the discourse at work throughout the film. At the end of the film that has fictionally portrayed his life, the real Gavino Ledda, who introduced the film, makes some final comments. He attempts to sum up what reservations he has by commenting on the fact that the film crew has only come to the Sardinian village in summer, and that they can't really know what the village is like in winter. After Ledda has finished speaking, the film repeats the end of the first fictional scene in which the father erupts into the schoolroom to claim his son for himself. The father attempts to explain to an uncomprehending teacher the reality of the financial pressures which make Gavino a precious asset, not to be wasted at school when he could be tending sheep. The whole of the scene is shot in a deliberate stylized manner with infrequent cuts from a master shot which frames Gavino between the father and the teacher (it is worth commenting that throughout the film it is a most traditional relation between narrative and shot which motivates the cutting). Having said his piece, Gavino's father leaves, dragging the boy, at which point the whole schoolroom explodes into laughter. The father, enraged, rushes back and informs the class that they must not laugh at Gavino because although the bell has tolled for Gavino today, tomorrow it will toll for them. At this point, and for the first time, we have a point of view shot from the father's position which surveys the faces of the frightened children. As face after face comes into frame, we hear on the soundtrack each child's frightened thoughts as they attempt to convince themselves that they will avoid the trip up to the hills to guard sheep. What these 'thoughts' reveal is that the father's point of view is a real one, until then we, like the teacher, have been amazed at this savage interruption into the world of education. It is these last shots of the children's faces which are repeated at the end of the film but this time there is no need for the voice over, the matching of sound and image has left the truth of the image to speak for itself. We, as the film, can comprehend both the world of the school, and the world of the father. As if to emphasise the film's omniscience and to expunge any doubts that the real Ledda might have raised in the spectator's mind, the closing shot of the film is the village square in winter.

These comments on *Padre Padrone* and *Nashville* are not (could not be) exhaustive nor are they morally prescriptive. It could be possible, for instance, to further analyse the relations between soundtrack and image and provide an account of the pleasure produced by these films. The analysis offered does, however, demonstrate that they both assume a relation between knowledge and vision, between politics and the cinema, which leaves them incapable of producing more than variations of an intellectualist position in which knowledge and powerlessness co-exist in a politics of apathy. This argument has obviously nothing to do with the activities of the films' directors in the sphere of representative politics (both Altman and the Taviani brothers are 'politically active'), rather it attempts to indicate the politics of their cinema and, in so doing, to raise questions about the very definition of the political.

The purpose of this article is to stress that discourse is the term used to indicate that one cannot analyse the formal articulation of the cinema independently of its political and ideological address. Indeed there can be no definition of that formal articulation which is not already informed by political and ideological struggles. But this imbrication equally implies that the discursive (the relation of the subject to the symbolic and the imaginary) is also already an element in the analysis of the political and the ideological. Revolutionary movements in the twentieth century bear constant witness to a concern to provide organizational structures which will not reproduce the dominant forms of identification. Emblematically one could point to Lenin's call for a new kind of party and his stress on the importance of self-criticism. Whatever the subsequent history of the practices of Bolshevik parties, Lenin's arguments indicate the fundamental importance of recasting the relations between the symbolic and the imaginary. Such a recasting will be the product of the struggle to transform the functioning of the discursive but it must be remembered that the struggle cannot be considered independently of other economic, political and ideological struggles.

It is in this context that one could make a last reference to Paul Willemsen's article. In his final section, Willemsen emphasises the importance of the construction of new imaginary unities around the parties and programmes that can transform social relations. For Willemsen, however, there is no question of transforming the relations of the imaginary to the symbolic, of transforming the functioning of the discursive. His formulations ignore the essential political and ideological questions⁵ about the forms of organization

⁵ See Colin MacCabe 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses' *Screen*, v15 n2, pp 21-26 and Stephen Heath 'Notes on Suture' *Screen*, v18 n4, pp 69-74.

42 that will bring about revolutionary change and how the discursive will function in such organizations. Once again the attack on formalism becomes complicit with that formalism as they both refuse to confront the politics of form and the form of politics.

The division between form and politics on which Willemen's article turns effectively blocks specific analyses by demanding impossible theoretical preconditions. Any analysis of the conditions of political transformation will involve considerations of the signifying practices of television and cinema, any analysis of the signifying practices of television and cinema will involve considerations of the conditions of political transformation, but, and this is merely to restate the argument of the article, there can be no general theory of the relations between the two. Obviously relations and priorities amongst these relations will be established in practice. Obviously the lack of a general theory does not imply that there will be no determinate grounds for particular analyses (there is no question of a return to impressionism) but these determinate grounds will not be provided by a general theory of the social totality but by the conditions of political and ideological struggle.

If these *theoretical* considerations enable us to appreciate the conditions for political intervention, an intervention which is never simply of politics in the cinema or the cinema in politics but the articulation within specific debates and struggles of the problems of form and politics, of the discursive and the ideological, they do not, however, provide any immediate solution to the conditions of intervention into any specific debate or struggle. Willemen's article, with its emphasis on voluntarism, presupposes a delimitable area of discourses about the cinema, intervention into which is simply a matter of volition. This position ignores the variety of those discourses and their institutional sites. Although there can be no possibility of a complete analysis, one very important distinction must be made to differentiate amongst these discourses and the other ideological practices with which they are imbricated if debate about *Screen's* (and SEFT's) intervention in British film culture is not to fall into mere ideological posturing.

One can sketch this distinction by recalling the relative success and failure of *Screen's* project over the last seven years. *Screen* has had some success in transforming the discourses of some of those who make of the cinema their major professional activity (film-makers, teachers, administrators). At the same time, the journalistic discourses which Willemen so violently attacks in his account of art cinema remain unaffected by *Screen's* work. Rather than accusing the practitioners of malevolence and bad faith, it would be better to consider the different practices which are imbricated with these different discourses. One major difference, and arguably the most important, is the different material conditions of seeing films: while *Screen* writes for an audience which is

used to seeing and re-seeing films, to using moviolas and editing tables, the journalistic reviewer writes for an audience who will only see a film once or twice and who can never control the frequency with which they see films nor interfere with the speed and direction of the projected images. In order to displace the journalistic discourses, it may be necessary to engage with this audience and to take these different conditions into account. This would imply an intervention at the level of consumption rather than at the level of production, distribution or study. It is possible to argue that such an intervention would be doomed to failure, that some de-naturalization of film (through repetition of, or interference with, projection) is necessary for an introduction of questions of discourse. Although such an argument demonstrates the utopianism of a project to produce 'alternative' reviews, it does not invalidate any intervention at the level of consumption.

Padre Padrone and *Nashville* provide good examples of films which until now have not figured in *Screen* discussions (discussions which tend to focus on classical narrative cinema or sections of the political and aesthetic avant-garde) but which are crucial to those whose interest in cinema and politics is partially determined by commercial distribution. *Time Out*, for example, has consistently addressed this audience over the past ten years and it would be wrong to minimize the importance of the work that it has accomplished. At the same time it is also significant that the caption reviews and interview features accorded to *Nashville* and *Padre Padrone* ignored considerations of discourse in favour of a content analysis which, while it should not be identified with, shares crucial features with, reactionary and impressionistic film criticism.⁶ If these examples indicate the difficulty of a project which would introduce concerns about the discourse of cinema into a regular pattern of reviewing and thus challenge and displace a journalistic discourse which has been able to ridicule or ignore work on signifying practices, they also indicate its pressing political necessity. The aim of this article has been to provide some of the theoretical considerations that might inform the discussions of such a project.

6 See *Time Out*, nn 288 and 393.

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Television – Football – The World

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

PREFACE This article takes as its starting point three observations on the question of television, politics and sport: first, that sport is almost always political and may even – to adapt Clausewitz's dictum on war – be regarded as a continuation of politics by other means; secondly, that the predominant relationship of the spectator to sport is partisan, and takes the form of an identification with a contestant, whether individual or collective; and, thirdly, that sport has been radically changed, in all its aspects, by the advent of television.

Provisional verification – or at least illustration – of these observations is not hard to find. One need look no further than, for example, the 1978 World Chess Championship, in which dour Soviet *apparachik* Anatoly Karpov took on and defeated romantic dissident Viktor Korchnoi, to see a reflection of cold-war politics in its sentimental Carterite guise. Or one might take the case of 'football supporters' who do little to support football but very clearly and vehemently support a team. Or, again, one might point to the way in which in televised games of American ('grid') football the ads are no longer timed to coincide with breaks in the play, but breaks in the play are introduced to coincide with the ads.¹

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, often illustrating not the single observations but their interaction (eg the invention, *for television purposes*, of entirely new 'sports' like Eurovision's *Jeux sans frontières*, which establish national and local identifications around glorified variants of village fête activities). What this article aims to do, however, is not to confirm these observations but to

¹ Except where otherwise indicated – eg in the use of phrases like 'American football', 'Rugby football' etc – the term 'football' here and hereafter refers to the worldwide game of Association Football (Soccer), the only literal foot-ball game.

- 46 investigate certain of the conditions of their combination, with a view to re-analysing them in a slightly less *ad hoc* fashion. The re-analysis, which takes as a central focus the 1978 Football World Cup, has no clear-cut conclusions to offer, but it may suggest ways in which the complex television/politics/sport can be viewed less defensively than is usually the case, and can, perhaps, become a productive terrain of struggle.

TELEVISION In its simplest conception television is a recording and transmitting device which enables images to be made visible in a place other than their place of origin and possibly at another (later) time. It resembles film in that it deals with images, but it differs from film, and resembles radio, in that it allows simultaneity: the television picture can be seen at the moment at which it is made, contemporary with the event of which it is an image. Unlike sound transmission, however, which can be almost neutral in respect of the event recorded (as is the case with a record or broadcast of a symphony concert), television is a process with effects: the television picture is always different from the event of which it is a picture – or, put another way, it is a different picturing from the one that would obtain in the presence of the event itself. Even where one can legitimately talk about events, the television picture is never exactly a reproduction of one: it is always, in some way or other, a *representation*.

The case for television being representation rather than reproduction is, of course, even stronger on those occasions (the majority) when there is no pre-given, 'natural' event to be reproduced but only a series of artificially composed 'pro-televisual events'.² None the less the prejudice dies hard that television is there to reproduce; that its subject is given reality; and that its success or failure is to be measured in proportion to the quantity of this reality that it reproduces without distortion. In so far as one of the functions of the television technical apparatus undoubtedly is to ensure accurate reproduction, this argument is not without force: no one wants a television system that fails to meet elementary standards of colour matching, stability in respect of shape, and so on. The question is, however, what these standards are required for. And it is by no means obvious, prejudice notwithstanding, that these standards can be seen as grounded in reality alone. The reproduction required of the television apparatus is not reproduction of reality, but reproduction of the desired image (produced somewhere down the line and now to be reproduced on the screen): it is, in other words, reproduction of (or in the service

² On the analogy of 'pro-filmic event': whatever is brought together, or finds its way, into the field of view of the video-camera.

of) something that is already admittedly representation – reality 47 entering as part of the *representamen*, but not the object of reproduction as such. Actual television practice – whether it be that of engineers or of programme producers – in fact corresponds more to this sort of mediated schema than to the one which links reproduction and ‘reality’ direct; but a complex of ideological/discursive factors also intervenes to make the direct-relation schema more appealing as a rationale.

It might be argued, however, that in drawing attention to the aspect of television which requires to be called representation, at the expense of the aspect of reproduction, we are merely offering an alibi (as did the old theorists of silent film) for imperfections in the reproduction. Television’s ideal being to reproduce – to bring as much of the world as possible into the sitting room – it may nevertheless happen that the reproduction falls short of the ideal: the picture is too small, the angle of vision too narrow; hence television becomes schematic, offering partial representations in the place of a representation so full as to be indistinguishable from the event. To privilege this accidental partiality – so the argument runs – is to make a quite unnecessary virtue of necessity.

Two answers are here possible. One is categorical: even if there were reproduction there would still be representation – either in the nature of the reproduced, or in its conversion by reproduction into a new spectacle, or in a mixture of the two. (Thus a performance of a play can be ‘reproduced’ on television, but it is of course already spectacle, and further modified by its adaptation to TV.) The second answer is, initially, more modest, and takes as its starting point an empirically obvious difference between sound and vision.

The difference to which I am referring concerns the inevitable directionality of the television image. Sound is directionally weak, and modern techniques of sound recording, mixing and playback can give the listener a neutral placement in his or her space indistinguishable for the real thing (no matter, for the moment, that most often there never was a ‘real thing’, that the sound mixing is pure simulation). The television picture, however, is always *somewhere*, and always presents an ‘angle’ – a point of view coming from somewhere and directed somewhere. It supposes a spectator directed towards the screen and a camera directed now this way now that to offer the spectator various ‘views’ of the televisual event. Like film, television is always a question of particular placements and directions (though, unlike film, it allows evasion, since television is so easy not to watch). Television, therefore, implicates the viewer in a structure of viewing for which there is no equivalent in the activity of listening to sound.³ Essen-

3 This statement should perhaps be qualified. There are structures of listening and there are differences between, say, listening to stereo through

48 tial to this structure are a directional viewing space, and the various directions of view offered by the image emanating from the box.⁴

Following this observation we may make another, which concerns the inseparability of the TV image and its sound accompaniment. In a marginal way the question of directionality is involved even here, since television sound is usually spatially located with the image and issues from the same box. More important, however, is the way that the sound acts as vehicle for a series of different discourses from those that might be held to be intrinsic to the image. In fact the forms of sound-image relationship in which the sound merely completes the image are very few. Thus a shot of an orchestra playing is 'completed' by the sound of the music being played, a mouthing head is 'completed' by its conversion into a talking head, a caption card is 'completed' by its being read out. But what is one to say of the various voice-off commentaries, the non-diegetic music (background music, theme tunes), the studio laughter, the platitudinising of Dr Bronowski in front of an Arctic waste,⁵ and generally the countless things that are *said* on television for other (and presumably better) reasons than that a slice of the world is present in front of the camera and these *dicta* are its necessary complement?

The problem that is raised here may best be approached by dividing the discourses of television sound provisionally into two groups: those that already possess an anchorage and a set of meanings elsewhere and for which television acts merely as a vehicle; and those which are very weakly anchored in an outer discursive world and whose meanings are the product of a combination into which they enter as a result of the specific procedures of television. Thus laughter in itself means nothing (or could mean almost anything); but studio laughter in the context of a comedy show means (a) 'this is a comedy show' and (b) 'laugh at this joke'.⁶ On the other hand the text of a Shakespeare play presented on television already has the gamut of meanings immanent in the play, and these meanings, although modified by the combination into which they enter, could stand on their own independent of the television presentation. The difference between the categories headphones, listening to stereo through loudspeakers, walking about while listening to the radio, moving the radio about, etc. All this goes to show, however, that strictly speaking 'reproduction' is not the only issue in relation to sound either.

4 Alias, in American usage, the 'tube'.

5 Example cited by Colin McArthur in his BFI Television Monograph n8, *Television and History*, London 1978, p 29.

6 These meanings can be correlated to Jakobson's 'metalingual' function (relating to the code) and to the 'conative' function (relating to the addressee) respectively; arguably a third function could also be involved, the one Jakobson calls 'phatic' and which relates to the establishment of contact. (R Jakobson 'Linguistics and poetics', in Th Sebeok (ed) *Style in Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 1960.)

is not hard and fast, since a potential for meaning exists everywhere while entire meanings are never simply transferred *en bloc*. But over the full discursive range it is not difficult to see how some discursive elements lend themselves to one treatment and others to the other. In general the more elaborate and the more closed the element being appropriated (say a song or a play) the less affected it is by its recombination on television, while elements that are either more simple or more amorphous, and are therefore more liable to contextual determination, are far more subject to placement within the television complex.

It follows from the foregoing – though the implications remain to be spelt out – that television provides, as part of its mode of operation, a special set of placements for the spectator-subject. In particular, a lot hinges on identification. Identification has recently come to be recognized by film theory as constituting a basic mode of relation between spectator-subject and the objects and processes of representation, and all the problems for film theory in understanding the work of identificatory processes apply to television as well. But for television the problems are perhaps even more acute, since the positions open to the tele-viewer are more varied and the heterogeneity of television material and its modes of address harder to overcome. The presupposition of the bulk of fictional cinema (the classic realist text) is of a single dominant speaking voice and a single (collective) addressee – the ‘audience’. Whatever the differences between members of the audience, the audience-as-a-whole is the object (generally) of a unitary mode of address, overriding difference. This is not the case for television, with its perpetual meshing of different sorts of programme and its need to confront the social heterogeneity of its component audience. Although television may aspire to homogeneity, it cannot assume it. On the contrary it must operate to produce it. And this means a constant work on the processes of identification, an active production of the identity of the audience itself by means of the introduction of points of identification onto which to pin that identity. This production of an audience, or of an audience-identity and audience-position, is a still unsolved problem for television, and one with important consequences, whether good or bad.

FOOTBALL With these remarks in mind I now want to examine a TV spectacle which was watched last summer by hundreds of millions of people and which was criticised by various writers – including myself – precisely for its spectacular qualities.⁷

⁷ The criticisms to which I refer in particular are to be found in a special feature in *Time Out*, n 426, 2-8 June 1978, published just before the start of the Argentina Finals, but they are largely anticipated in the BFI Television Monograph n4, *Football on Television*, edited by Ed Buscombe and published in 1975 in the aftermath of the 1974 World Cup.

50 : This spectacle was the 1978 Football World Cup, held in Argentina and the criticisms took the line that the televising of the event produced a construction which traduced two realities: that of football and that of the Argentinian dictatorship. It was unequivocally argued that television was a construction, but a wish subsisted that it was less of one, or a less tendentious one, and that more of reality would peep through the screen. In retrospectively reviewing these criticisms (with which I remain in many ways in sympathy) I want to argue that breaking the spell which held so many millions spellbound is not a matter of conforming the television construction to reality but of questioning that reality and what can be made to appear in that reality. Or, better, it is a matter not of questioning the 'construction' and the 'reality' separately (the former thus inevitably emerging as a distortion of the latter) but together. It is in breaking down the construction that we come to see how the reality is itself constructed – constructed, that is, out of representations whose meaning consists precisely in their claim to represent reality itself.

If we attempt to construct 'football' as an object of representation we find it to be a game played with a ball and with the feet, usually on a marked-out grassy pitch but also in playgrounds, gymnasiums, backstreets and so on; we find a continuum from kickabouts engaged in by small children who do not know the rules let alone stick to them, to organised matches, watched by thousands, between professional teams supervised by referees who penalise every infringement that catches their eye. We find also that 'football' exists way outside the context of actual play; it exists in the activities of club directors and sports-gear manufacturers, newspaper correspondents and television advertisers, in the training undergone by players, amateur as well as professional, in brawls and riots occasionally leading to international incidents; and above all it exists as the object of a constant and repetitive discussion which the apparatus feeds. It is a mistake to think of the football spectator's week (any more than the player's) as limited to about two and a half hours on a Saturday afternoon, beginning with an expectant arrival in the stadium and ending with an elated or dejected departure to the car park or bus stop. Although the match (or, more precisely, the final whistle) is clearly pivotal, what pivots around it is no less important – reports of other games listened to on the radio on the way home, the same again on television on arrival, Jimmy Hill on television later that night, the Sunday papers, television again on Sunday afternoon, then the Monday papers, discussion among friends and workmates not just about the match but about the various reports, then the mid-week gossip about team changes and transfers, and so on through to the build-up for next Saturday's match. And since next Saturday's match will probably be an away game, our hypothetical spectator will this time (unless an avid supporter) live only for the

reports, the television presentation (if any) and the discussion, 51 without having had direct sight of the match itself.

Football then, for the average adult spectator, lives largely in representation and recall. To the process that had already taken shape in the first part of the century television has in the first instance merely added an intervening stage, midway between direct sight and reading about it. Television football shares in both those aspects. At one extreme there is live coverage of an entire game, which is more or less a substitute for direct sight; and at the other extreme are highlights from a match already reported on, possibly already directly seen. Screened 'highlights', moreover, share with reporting the qualities of being selective and judgemental. The memorable incident is recalled – the goal, the near miss, the spectacular foul – and judgement is passed on it. What British television has recently added to the process is the air of infallibility. Better than the spectator on the terraces or the reporter in the press box, the television camera *sees* the truth – and Jimmy Hill confirms. No longer the (un)pleasure of uncertainty. The spectator as self-appointed arbiter is dispossessed; judgement is returned to the camera and the confirming voice: 'I think we can now see that the player was definitely not offside.'

What this affects is an essential part of the imaginary structure of the game – partisanship. Of the possible spectator attitudes to sport, partisanship is undoubtedly the most basic and the most common. Every other attitude contains an element of partisan identification – even if the identification is temporary and can be suspended or even switched. Even the gambler, who at first sight seems the opposite of the partisan, is forced to identify and to be committed – if only to where his money is. The difference is that the true partisan is pre-committed, and cannot vary the risks he takes according to the odds. As a spectator sport (and discounting the pools), football – unlike racing, boxing or even baseball – is a purely partisan affair. It excites loyalty which can often be lifelong, and certainly in the vast majority of cases extends beyond the duration of a single game. Regular supporters often prefer to sit or stand at the ends of a ground, not just because it is cheaper but because being at the end puts the spectator in the firing line: your position is that of your team, coming forward or being driven back. The same partisanship infects the reading of reports: the local paper can be relied on to report your side ('City unlucky again'); other papers are suspect, probably biased against you – like the ref.

Into this structure television intervenes by reaffirming impartiality. Broadcasting indifferently to supporters of both sides and of neither, television adjudicates from the half-way line, using the end cameras mostly for replays. Also, by using camera positions down one side of the ground, television preserves 'flow' according to the classic rules inherited from cinema, in particular the

52 180° rule.⁸ The impartial and voiceless flow of images is enough to contain and neutralise any effect of interruption produced by the pauses for replays – which are in any case interruptions sanctioned by the voice from elsewhere, that of the unseen but all-seeing commentator. Images and commentary thus collude to produce a position which is both neutral and authoritative and which derives its authority, in part at least, from the commentator's claim to preserve the neutrality immanent in the image.⁹

In exchange for the loss of team identification, television tends to offer a focus on individuals. The principal merit of the mid-way position – the position of the TV camera master shot and of the 'best' seats – is that it affords a view of the match as a whole, and in particular of tactical moves. British television, however, sacrifices the global view to a succession of partial views, cutting in frequent¹⁰ close shots with a long-focal lens which voyeuristically single out the individual confrontation, the display of ball control, the involuntary expressivity of pleasure and pain. The effect can be seen as one of humanising the spectacle, but it is not exactly that – despite the occasional obvious pitch for the moment of pathos, often involving a shot of a distraught or contemplative manager on the bench. More often the effect is best described as fragmentation-within-flow: the scene is parcelled out, displacing the individual body or bodies from the team context in order to make them a part-object or object of a component-desire, with 'wholeness' restored to the view only by the flow of images into new objects linked by the movement of the ball.

For the true fan this is very inadequate compensation for the loss of the team-identified position; but for the millions whose closest contact with football is *The Big Match* or *Match of the Day* the loss is not felt, and the pleasure of television, as a spectacle in itself, comes into operation in its own right. Although there is a 'hard' argument that television is preferred because it can be enjoyed so comfortably at home, it is also the case that the pleasure it offers is not just a comfortable surrogate, but is actually different, calling different attitudes and emotions into play.¹¹ For many

8 Cf Ed Buscombe's comments in *Football on Television*, op cit, pp 31-32.

9 Not that commentators always are neutral. They may be so in league games, but in international games involving one British and one non-British team they are often grossly chauvinistic – relying on their existing reputation for 'authority' and on the fact that identifications are on the whole not divided and most viewers are prepared to go along with supporting 'our lot' against 'the other lot'.

10 For details see Charles Barr's essay in *Football on Television*, op cit, particularly pp 48-49.

11 A quaint recognition of the diversity of audiences is to be found in a remark by football commentator Alec Weeks (quoted by Barr, loc cit, p 51) that cut-ins, etc, are not for the 'fan' but for 'mums and daughters'. Strictly for the birds, as they used to say. It should be added that some non-fan TV spectators are also male.

fans, certainly, television is mainly there to be part of the process of repetitive recall; but it is also required for the rest of the audience to be alive in a simulated present. To the audience which does not 'follow' the game, television presentation has a life of its own; identifications are made *ad hoc*, with the movement of play. There is no reason to see in the adoption of such a position any loss of authenticity; deprived of the posture of partisanship and occasionally subjected to the voice of callow impartial authority, the televiewer is not for that reason removed from the 'real thing'.

There remains a further aspect of the question of team-identification to be considered, which is the political. It is a well-known fact that many clubs, particularly in big cities, carry with them traces of ethnic or religious division. Hearts and Hibs in Edinburgh, Rangers and Celtic in Glasgow, City and United in Manchester, Liverpool and Everton on Merseyside are traditionally distinguished by being respectively Protestant and Catholic (ie Irish). There are also clubs with a strong tradition of local Jewish support, and there is an increasing distinction emerging between clubs which employ black players and those which seem hesitant to do so.

Now it is often argued that the relation is one of cause and effect, with 'real' social divisions at the level of religion or race being reflected or expressed at the level of football. While this may contain an aspect of contingent truth in some cases, as a general formulation it is inadequate. It would be better to say that football is *available* for a whole variety of political or quasi-political identifications, but that these identifications are also transferable and may indeed be transferred from football onto something else. A possible alternative formulation might be that football identifications are a displacement of identifications formed or in the process of formation elsewhere, but although this eliminates crude notions of cause-and-effect it still does not account for the reversibility of the movement. If one looks at the history of the game one finds, in addition to cases of clubs founded around pre-existing divisions, cases of clubs founded to produce an identity – say between a works and its works team – and a constant slippage of this identity, so that a works team becomes a local team and from there a national representative and from there perhaps simply a representative of football. Or a football identity (and its attendant identifications) may displace itself onto politics. (This last would appear to be the case with some London football supporters and the National Front, where clearly it is not a matter of fascism displacing itself onto football, but, if anything, the other way round.)

To argue this is not to argue for the primacy of a silly ball-game over more 'serious' questions, but for a certain degree of conjuncturally determined autonomy in the movement of identifications, an 'arbitrariness of the sign' in terms of what football-as-signifier can be made to represent. This arbitrariness is not

54 total, and is held in check by a variety of factors of undoubted materiality. But there is no easily assigned primacy of one factor over another, nor of external factors over those internal to football. Nor, and this is crucial, is any identity either total or inviolable. As Argentina shows.

THE WORLD By any standards the map of the 'World' Cup is bizarre (though not so bizarre as World Series baseball or Kerry Packer's World Cricket). All countries of the world are theoretically permitted to compete, and the game is playable and indeed played in all of them. But in practice the Cup is dominated by the nations of two continents – Europe and South America. There are a few political exclusions (People's China has only just been recognised by FIFA, the world governing body of the sport) and the system of qualifying rounds limits the number of peripheral countries that can take part in the finals. But it is rare for any African, Asian or even Central American team to progress beyond the first stage of the final rounds – though North Korea caused a dramatic upset in 1966 by beating Italy and nearly beat Portugal, the eventual semi-finalists, as well. The Cup is held roughly alternately in Europe and in South America and has usually been won by teams playing on their home continent.

While the structure may seem to conspire to perpetuate the existing pattern of dominance, it is also worth stopping for a moment to consider the history out of which this structure emerged. The game started in Britain and spread outwards from there with industrial and commercial expansion, but not with settler-colonialism. Football went where the flag didn't. It spread to West, Central and Eastern Europe and to Latin America, helped a bit by British works managers and by local Anglophile bourgeoisies, but after a while autonomously; via France it went to the countries of French Africa; and since decolonisation it has spread further throughout the Third World. But to most areas of the Empire the British exported other sports – hockey, cricket and (for whites only) rugby. North America developed its own mass of popular sports and even established its own 'baseball zone' in countries particularly vulnerable to US hegemony – Cuba, S Korea, Japan. The United States did actually have a World Cup soccer team in the 1930s – based, interestingly enough, on a works team from Bethlehem Steel¹² – and doubtless it will have one again; but for the moment it is conspicuous by its absence.

The momentum turning football into a whole-world (largely Third-World) game is an interesting phenomenon in its own right: the oil boom has brought in the Arab countries; Cuba (despite

12 See Brian Glanville *History of the World Cup*, London, 1973.

Fidel Castro's penchant for baseball) is developing football as a game at which to compete with its Latin neighbours; Peoples China is emerging as a football power. All this will have its effect in due course. But more significant in the present is the effect on political representation of the absence of the United States. This absence, coupled with the relative weakness of the Soviet Union as a football power, means that there is no representation within World Cup football of the Super-power contest which so dominates, for example, the Olympic Games. In general East-West conflict is weakly represented. The two Germanies may be drawn against each other in the qualifying rounds, and generally there are two or three East European countries involved in the finals. But the division between 'East' and 'West' as it affects Europe and as it overlaps with the division 'socialism'/'capitalism' has little place on the signifying map of the World Cup. Its place is taken by a division along another axis, that of 'North' and 'South', bringing a different set of political significations into play.

Schematically, the signifying map of the World Cup is one which on the one hand opposes Europe to South America and on the other hand associates one half of Europe (the Southern half) with the majority of countries of South America. The division within Europe can be described as Nordic versus Latin, while that within South America opposes the Spanish-speaking nations of the continent (which in Northern European eyes represent an intensified degree of Latinity) to Portuguese-speaking and multi-racial Brazil. The motivating signifiers of these divisions are hair and skin colour, onto which are overlaid imputed differences of national 'temperament' and style of play. Thus, on a crude example, 'Latin' is associated with 'fiery', while 'Nordic' is supposedly 'cool'. But the 'cool' of the Nordic fair-haired Dutch, expressed in their controlled possession-play, is shared by the 'tropical' Brazilians (often of African or Amerindian descent), in implicit contrast to the hot headed Italians or Argentinians. Meanwhile these visible or imputed distinctions 'correspond' to a set of facts extracted from other discourses. Of the countries competing in the 1978 finals, the most Nordic – Sweden, Holland – are also those in which there is least poverty (except among dark-skinned immigrants); the most dark-skinned countries – Tunisia, Iran, Brazil – are those in which there is the most; and the Latin (Italo-Hispanic) countries are somewhere in between.

Which 'correspondences' are going to be signified is clearly open to variation: suppose, for example, that 'Latin' Bulgaria rather than 'Nordic' Poland had been the 'Socialist' team in competition. And *how* the correspondences and signifying distinctions are going to be taken up will vary as well, since there are different standpoints from which they can be taken up and different codes governing their application. The codes that structure British readings of hair-colour signifiers tend to assign the same values

56 in football as in *film noir* – with the additional factor that where national differences are at stake the British spectator will locate himself in the ‘blonde’ position. What differs most in fact is not the code as such but which value within a given code can be assumed as a point of identification and which combination of codes is present to permit the association of a signifier and a signified at the identificatory focus.

Football is about winning, and the question posed in Buenos Aires in June 1978 was whether a European team would win the Cup on South American soil for the first time. Then, following from that, there was the question of which European team could do it – might it be Scotland? – and which South American team – Argentina or Brazil? – was most likely to stop them. Then, functioning as an urgent over-determination, there was the political question: what did it mean that the Cup was being staged in Argentina, and that Argentina might well win the Cup on its home ground? In the event Argentina did win. So what meaning should we attribute to that?

An early reaction among some European leftists to the realisation that the country where the Cup was to be held was now a vicious military dictatorship was to call for a boycott. Slogans in a curious Franglais – or rather Spranglais – saying ‘boycottez le Mundial’ are still to be found, fading, on the walls of French university towns. It was also suggested – again in Europe – that the Argentine left might take steps to sabotage the cup. These childishly punitive proposals were vigorously repudiated by both the marxist and the Peronist left in Argentina, on the obvious grounds that little harm would be done to the regime but a lot of popular anger would be aroused which would be turned against the opposition. From a European perspective too it soon became clear that simply opposing the Cup was an action that could only rebound against its initiators.

Given that the Cup would – and did – take place unimpeded, the question then arose in more general terms of what sort of political representation was already implicit in its staging and how this representation could be affected so that the ‘Argentina’ of the Cup could be seen also to be the Argentina of political repression. It was to this demand that the *Time Out* feature addressed itself, as did various articles by journalists in the regular press, such as Hugh McIlvanney in *The Observer*. Against the chorus of fatuous references to the ‘British connection’ in Argentina or to the rapturous reception the Scots could expect there, a counterpoint emerged documenting the tortures, murders and ‘disappearances’ perpetrated by agents of the present Argentinian regime and hinting, occasionally, at the collusion of certain imperialisms, North

The limitation of this approach, as adopted, was that it never addressed the question of how the two forms of representation – the football and the politics – were related. It was assumed – at least for the most part – that the football representation was intrinsically apolitical, or political only in a state of latency, and that politics could somehow be introduced parallel to it and then, by a crossing of the threads, inserted into it. To a certain extent this assumption was verified in the way the Cup was televised – set within a closed arena, with alternating shots of the competing players and of the spectators boxed inside the stadium – and in the approach taken by the Argentine authorities, which insisted on the ‘normality’ of the Cup as international event. Indeed the most immediately striking feature of the Cup as televised was its political indifferentism. The picture was shot by a West-German trained Argentinian production team and differed very little from the picture produced by the Germans for the 1974 Cup, held in Germany. The sound track was provided, for Britain, by the usual British commentators and presenters, and also differed very little from 1974. On both sound and picture Argentina was represented as a perfectly normal country. On the one hand there was none of the celebratory iconography by which a country or a regime can mark its political specificity – red flags, swastikas, Statues of Liberty and the like: no-one could have done a Leni Riefenstahl with the 1978 World Cup. But on the other hand there was little that could be taken to refer to the conditions of life of the people or to any set of social relations outside of those of football. There were teams, there were crowds, there was a man in an overcoat who was designated as General Videla and with whom (according to some later reports) the Argentine team did not shake hands. But that was all.

In another way, however, Argentina – a certain concept ‘Argentina’ – was a real presence on the television screen, a way that is so obvious that it is amazing that it should pass unremarked. (The only reason I can think of for its passing thus unremarked is that the pressure of naturalistic assumptions about the ‘medium’ distracts attention from the already symbolised and symbolising character of what is given on the screen.) This presence was marked, in the first instance, simply in the form of a colour, blue,

13 The history of the Argentine connection merits a study on its own. Against the received version (English, Scots and Welsh settlers, tea rooms in Buenos Aires, Bovril, the anglomania of J-L Borges, etc) needs to be set the anti-British Peronist reaction, and with that a set of separate difficulties for the left, since the anti-imperialism of Peronism was a cover for a certain amount of pro-Nazism. The left in Argentina (see *La hora de los hornos*) has suffered for a long time from the split between Peronist populism and the Eurocentric anti-fascism of the Socialist and Communist orthodoxy.

58 which was that of a national flag, a national team and of all the banners that filled the stadium on any occasion on which Argentina was playing, but most conspicuously on the day of the final itself. Had the dark blue and white of Argentina been opposed to another symbolising blue, say that of Italy, the signifying pattern might have been different, but as it was the opposing side happened to be Holland – a country whose signified identity was singularly weak, since its team colour (orange) was not the colour of its flag (red, white and blue), while even its name (*Nederland*, *Holland*, *Pays-Bas*) and that of its people (*Nederlands*, Dutch, *Hollandais*) is uncertainly attributed by speakers of other languages. Against the weak presence of the Dutch (with their tiny handful of supporters), the omnipresence of the blue declared an identity, that of an Argentinian nationhood axed around football and from which any other Argentina (the Argentina of Borges, of Evita, of Welsh settlers in Patagonia, or whatever) was for the time being evacuated. And to this Argentina, as with those models of molecules featured on science programmes, all sorts of meanings could then attach.

Present in the 'Argentina' created by World Cup television was the effect of certain images, to which camera and commentary constantly returned. Above all the featuring of individuals – the saturnine Luque, the mercurial Kempes, the sylph-like Ardiles, the melancholic team-manager Menotti chain-smoking on the sidelines. The figure of Menotti, with his name connoting Italian extraction and his watery eyes, was particularly interesting. Like his Brazilian counterpart Coutinho, Menotti was reputed to have 'modernised' the South American game and to have made it more European – a phrase which can have at least two meanings, one related to football and one more general. Related to football (and as spoken by a British commentator) it meant an end to the 'clogger' image with which Argentinian football is traditionally credited (cf Alf Ramsay's remarks about 'animals' at the time of the 1966 Cup); more generally (and no doubt a lot less consciously) it carried connotations of the 'modernisation' in whose euphemistic name apologists of American and British imperialism justify support for reactionary regimes in (specifically) Brazil and Iran – but it also suggested a *rapprochement* between us and them, a relaxation of the 'dago' stereotype. Meanwhile, as the Cup proceeded, it was becoming clearer and clearer that this modernised Argentina was up for sale, and that just as Brazil now produces engines for Fiat so Argentina would produce midfield engine-power for Valencia and Spurs.

What is important to note about this representation is that, however obliquely, certain discourses are spoken through it which give Argentina a collocation neither as an undifferentiated 'Third-World' country nor (the way the left would have it) as a fascist regime. This in itself is not a cause for complaint. A national con-

cept is always both overdetermined in its production and polyvalent in its availability and its effects, and, of the various ways a country can be conceptualised, those which define it either by its regime or by some generic placement in a geo-political camp are not necessarily the most constructive (though on occasion they may be). The parallel case of Brazil is instructive here. Brazil won the World Cup in Chile in 1962 under a parliamentary regime; performed badly in England in 1966 under a military government; and won the Cup again in Mexico in 1970 after a second coup had brought in a new, harsher military dictatorship. But throughout the period Brazilian football remained unchanged, unavailable to governmental exploitation, but significantly available to a racial and third-worldist reading which has already had its effects throughout the world and is having further effects in England now as young black players emerge to take their place in the game.¹⁴ By these standards the example of Argentina is far less progressive – not so much because the military escaped relatively unscathed in the reporting of the Cup as because the representation of Argentina proved to be finally containable within the limits of imperialist discourse. The effects on the way football is played and spoken of in Britain will probably be progressive – though more because of Scotland's débâcle than because of what was to be learnt, positively, from the ways others played the game, or even because of the importation of Ardiles, Villa or Tarantini. But a Dutch victory would have been progressive too, in strict footballing terms; and in wider terms the 'Argentina' that won the Cup was too much (though all too accurately) constructed in a client relationship to Europe for there to be much of a rupture in the complex of ideological representation. In television terms, finally, although I would not argue for the filming of football in long shot on grounds of realism, the relatively laid-back style of the World Cup coverage (by British standards) did produce a sense of the game being played by teams, and by teams which knew how to use space.

POSTSCRIPT On the day this article was due to be finished, there were two items of news: first, that Argentina added to its trophies of the year a victory in that other television spectacular, *Miss World*; and secondly that there was to be no more Jimmy Hill, since London Weekend Television had scooped the rights to television presentation of all League games. Meanwhile *Evita* runs on.

14 The name of Pele is the 'magic' here, but one should not forget the seamier side: players dragged out of the slums of Rio or São Paulo and cast back there after their super-stardom was over, nor (in England) shouts like 'You're not Pele yet, nigger', which I once heard launched at Viv Anderson by a small section of the crowd at West Ham.

SEFT Easter School 1979

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Television Situation Comedy*

Mick Eaton

There has been virtually nothing written about the television situation comedy as a specifically televisual form. The debates conducted from within the television industry tend to centre around questions of how 'realistic' or 'true to life' the situations and characters in such shows are; this was exemplified in the debates about racial, ethnic and gender stereotyping at this year's Edinburgh Festival. Such arguments embody certain assumptions about the audience which need constant interrogation. In academic work on television the situation comedy has been all but ignored, which is surprising in view of the specifically televisual nature of the parameters of the situation comedy and of what one television practitioner (Michael Grade) has called the audience's 'insatiable demand for comedy'. For example, in all the work that has been done on *Coronation Street* there has been no attempt, to my knowledge, to deal with the elements of comedy in the programme, and certainly no attempt to see how the use of comedy in the soap-opera/serial articulates with its use in the situation comedy. On the other hand the humour of *The Sweeney*, a different genre of programme, has been used as an explanation of its 'appeal'. 'One enjoys the jokes because they reveal a man who dislikes authority and uses humour as a way of attacking it or protecting himself against it, by not taking too seriously his own subjection. Humour is one dimension of Regan's protest against the system',¹ as if humour as a category existing outside television can be brought in as a justification of that medium's 'effects', again with no question of its articulation with other instances of television

* I am very grateful to the staff of the Comedy Department at the BBC Television Centre for allowing me to view their tapes, and to Erich Sergeant of the BFI for his technical assistance.

1 'The Sweeney - Better than Nothing?' E. Buscombe, *Screen Education* n20, Autumn 1976, p 67.

62 comedy. In my view, unless such work is done there will be a constant temptation to collapse back into a culturalist and sociological reading of individual television programmes in which 'criticism' becomes just another 'point of view' from a position along an ideological spectrum.² Moreover, any such reading will inevitably re-instate the terms of television's own critical possibilities – programmes considered in relation to their 'realism' or 'quality'.

Although in Raymond Williams' book *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*, there is some discussion of the antecedents of the situation comedy, it is seen largely (and, I would argue, ineffectively) in relation to the variety-sketch, there is no discussion of the situation comedy itself, in spite of Williams' own recognition of it as an 'effectively new form', a product, as it were, of that innovating form of television, namely 'television itself'.³ Therefore, the focus of this article will be on defining the specifically televisual parameters of these half-hour dramas ('the situation') rather than on questions of what makes them 'funny' ('the comedy'). It must be stressed, however, that this attempt is not to be seen as part of an unmaterialistic project to define a 'single, coherent language' of television, (where 'language' is made to equal 'transparent message-bearing vehicle', and where concessions towards semiotics are made only to recuperate the terms of bourgeois aesthetics in the instatement of 'the code' as a stylistic unit). Rather, it is an attempt to arrive at a base which simultaneously shifts the emphasis from discussion of television comedy either in terms of its antecedents (a 'history' of the 'forms' of 'popular entertainment') or in terms of its quality (either 'as television' or 'as comedy') and equally provides a grounding against which the heterogeneity of television's output in its specific instances can be related. The dangers of such an enterprise seem to me to be as follows: the heterogeneity of television's output must be related to what Heath and Skirrow have referred to as, on the one hand: 'the range of codes and systems at work in television over and across its matters of expression', and, on the other hand, to 'the particular inscriptions and movements of subject and meaning and ideology'.⁴ If the first of these terms – the range of codes and systems – is undervalued then there is a danger of a possible collapse back into a debate over the ideological (never defined) 'message' or 'effect' of a particular programme, manifested, for example, in such questions as whether Alf Garnett's/Archie Bunker's character had any effect on 'deep-rooted attitudes' or whether

2 Implicit, indeed, in the phrasing of the question 'Better than Nothing?' better than what? better for whom?

3 R. Williams: *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*, Fontana, London 1974, pp 76-77.

4 S Heath and G Skirrow: 'Television: A World in Action', *Screen* v18 n2, Summer 1973, pp 9-11.

they serve to 'reinforce bigotry and prejudice'.⁵ If the second – 63
inscriptions and movement of subject and meaning and ideology –
is under-valued then the danger is of a return to a formal aesthetic
reading of the 'television message'. There is, however, a third
danger which is harder to guard against: any reading of an instance
of television in its production of meanings should be consistent
with analysis of the actual conditions of production (defined in
the widest possible way) within the television companies them-
selves. As information in this area seems difficult to obtain the
contribution of this article to the project of a construction of a
materialist reading of particular instances of television practice
is presented as tentative in every aspect but one: the need to shift
the terms of emphasis, analysis and definition away from those
already provided by the television practitioners themselves.

We must have certain reservations about the establishment of
'television studies' as 'academically available as a new and self-
centred discipline'.⁶ While much of film studies has allowed itself
to be involved with film-history (a history which must always be
unhistorical if it fails to deal with the presence of the spectator),⁷
work on television's past should be conducted in relation to the
defined ideological demands of the present. Perhaps it is even a
blessing in disguise that so little television archival material is
available for study. The past is effaced by television as it happens
– our memories involve us in the television's present by the con-
stant re-inscriptions of its past (immediate and distant). This point
will be developed more fully below in relation to two series – *Come
back Mrs Noah* and *Going Straight*. Bearing these remarks in mind,
it is necessary to look briefly at an instance of television's situation
comedy past in order to complicate Williams' proposed evolution-
ary model and to see the situation comedies of the past in relation
to a model of the television situation comedy which I will attempt
to develop.

The Search for Antecedents

The 'situation comedy' functions as a category in both BBC and
IBA handbooks and in the structure of the television companies

5 'Actually, I don't think any television show can do much to unseat
deeply held attitudes. I'd be a fool if I thought for a moment that my
little half-hour situation comedy can, in 8 years, accomplish something
in the area of bigotry that the entire Judeo-Christian ethic hasn't been
able to effect in a couple of thousand years.' From final draft of Norman
Lear's MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television
Festival, 28 August 1978.

6 Heath and Skirrow, op cit, p 9.

7 Cf Metz's remarks on the film archive in 'The Imaginary Signifier',
Screen v16 n2, Summer 1975, p 24.

64 themselves as a species within the genus 'Light Entertainment', of which the other species is 'Variety'. In view of this it might be seen unsurprising that Williams⁸ concentrates on an unproblematic 'evolution' of both the solo turn and the variety sketch into 'situation comedy'. Moreover, this 'evolution' is 'essentially unevolved' merely adapted to fit the demands of an 'altered technology and the altered relations with audiences which television involved'. However, the specificities of these 'altered relations' need to be outlined before any further work can be done, and it is clear that they will not be arrived at merely by reference to an 'altered technology'. The techno-teleological problematic Williams advances here may perhaps fit the variety show, but it will certainly not suffice for the situation comedy.

It is necessary to go beyond his remark that 'a significant proportion of what might abstractedly be classified as television drama is composed in effect of variety-hall sketches' if we want to avoid returning to either a technological determinism which considers 'the forms of television' (and, in consequence, its forms of organizational structure) as a product of that medium's technology, or an uncritical 'abstraction' which sees 'television drama' solely as 'drama' on 'television' (a position implicit in much of what passes as television criticism in newspapers). Indeed, when Williams goes on to say: 'But in some very significant and popular cases, from *Steptoe and Son* to *Till Death Us Do Part*, to *All in the Family* an effectively new form has been created and needs to be separately considered', it becomes clear that the use of variety-theatre antecedents alone is inadequate for that consideration.⁹ Whilst it may be a convenient 'rule-of-thumb' to consider that the nearer a television situation comedy is to a variety show solo-turn the more diffuse and undefined its paradigmatic situation may be (examples from the not too distant past might be Frankie Howerd's *Up Pompeii* and *Whoops Baghdad*, and going further back, *Here's Harry* with Harry Worth – where the 'situation' of the show is brought much more in line with the pre-defined talents of the particular performer, so that Howerd constantly addresses the audience directly, going through the motions of his 'turn' rather than satisfying the demands of a coherently constructed situation). The 'alteration' of such a turn from its antecedent form is irreducible to technological explanations.

The search for antecedents throws up other questions: What is the relation of the 'evolved' forms to the 'unevolved forms'? How

8 Williams, *op cit*, p 60.

9 As an aside: the oft-quoted example of the prototype for British situation comedy is the radio-series *Bandwagon* first broadcast in 1937, starring Arthur Askey and Richard Murdoch, in which the situation centred on the pair of them living in a flat on the top of Broadcasting House.

does the relation of these forms with the variety-theatre sketch articulate with their relation to other instances of television drama not concerned with 'making the audience laugh'? How does the television situation comedy relate to and differ from its other possible antecedents: the radio comedy, British films of the 1950s? (I'm thinking specifically of Boulting Brothers' *Private's Progress* and *Brothers-in-Law* which provided the model for the television shows *The Army Game* and *Brothers-in-Law*, a practice, incidentally, still common in the States, witness such shows as *M.A.S.H.* and *Paper Moon* and the childrens' weekly comic (with its stable characters/situations each with its 'page-slot'). Such questions cannot even be broached unless we have some idea of the television situation comedy as a defined species, and even then the answers would provide us with very little material for the interrogation of the present concerns of the situation comedy.

*The Burns and Allen Show*¹⁰ is an example of one of the earliest television situation comedies using established vaudeville characters. If we look closely at the development of the show we can see a process which is in no way an 'adaptation' or 'evolution' of vaudeville material to fit the technological exigences of television, but a repositioning of the spectator in relation to this material, a repositioning which cannot be explained by any McLuhanesque resort to 'the demands of the medium'. In the earliest series the show is obviously and markedly split between the first two-thirds which is a domestic situation comedy whose little narrative is played out, then immediately before the last set of commercials a female announcer says 'George and Gracie will be back to do one of their vaudeville routines'. Following the commercial break Burns and Allen return to do just that, for the final third of the half-hour slot. The last third of the show involves a filming of this routine: this requires a static long-shot by a single camera, with the stars standing on stage in front of a closed curtain – the way they would be seen on a vaudeville stage – the act is transferred 'directly' into the home. The first two-thirds of the show sets them in a domestic situation centred around the stock sets of the rooms of their Manhattan apartment. The important thing to note is that there is no discrepancy between their characters in the vaudeville routine, and their characters in the domestic situation. George

10 A CBS show, of which 239 programmes were made between 1950 and 1958. To the best of my knowledge, no tapes of the *Burns and Allen* show exist in this country – my memory (the memory of a television viewer) of them comes from current nightly re-runs on American stations. In the article I have therefore to create an impression of the show by description rather than by any formal reference to tapes of the show that could be viewed and worked on by others. While I have tried to draw solely on British situation comedies for sources of reference this was not possible in the discussion of antecedents as there are no easily available and easily viewable tapes of old BBC series from the 1950s.

66 is still dry, wise-cracking and laconic, and Gracie the woman with a logic of her own, causing confusion (and comedy) by the misunderstandings generated by the lack of that logic's intersection with other characters in the drama, but outside the central family situation. (Some of these 'outside' characters are regulars, such as Blanche and Harry Morton, the neighbours. Others are involved for one episode only – delivery boys, sales people, their son's new girl friend, and others – but all are caught up in the narrative to the extent that they are caught in the operations of Gracie's idiosyncracies). George is the only one who understands Gracie's logic and so remains unaffected and amused by the confusions it causes in others. Thus the classic paradigm of the upper-middle class domestic situation comedy is adhered to – the difference between this and a contemporary British example such as *Happy Ever After*, lies crucially in the fact that the show is built around (scripted, stage managed, etc) the audience's supposed recognition of George and Gracie as vaudeville stars (familiar also from their radio shows) and a knowledge of their stage characters and routines (George as straight-man to Gracie's improbable stories about her 'kooky' family) which stipulates both the maintenance of these characters in the 'situation comedy' segment of the show, and the need to finish the show with a film of one of these very routines. So, in this early series the situation comedy and the vaudeville routine exist side-by-side. The difference with something like *Happy Ever After* is that the audience's supposed recognition of Terry Scott and June Whitfield (playing characters called 'June' and 'Terry' in the series) depends on a knowledge of their faces, performances in other television situation comedies (eg, Terry Scott in *Hugh and I*, June Whitfield in *Beggar My Neighbour*) not from any other variety situation. Indeed, Terry Scott's most famous 'vaudeville' character is of a little boy.

In the later series of *The Burns and Allen Show*, however, we notice some differences. George and Gracie have moved to California – the action now centres around the stock-sets of their Beverly Hills apartment, and of their neighbours', again the Mortons. The basic situation of the show remains unaltered despite the geographical shift. (People from outside coming into contact with Gracie's strange logic, George in perfect control refusing to be drawn into the resulting chaos, refusing initially to play the role of a *deus ex machina* who could clear up the mess right from the start and thus defuse the narrative development of the show). However, the show has changed in one fundamental way: the vaudeville routines which closed the earlier series and which provided the point of reference of the audience's recognition of Burns and Allen as stars have vanished completely (although George and Gracie do appear right at the end of the show to 'sign-off' with their vaudeville catch-phrase ('say Goodnight Gracie' and so on), but crucially this now occurs on the balcony of their home, rather

than on a vaudeville stage) and a new technique has emerged: when things start getting out of hand George will turn to the audience and say something like: 'Well, Gracie seems to have got herself into a mess again – I think I'll watch this with you', at which point he turns on his television set and apparently watches the next scene of the situation comedy drama, usually taking place in the stock-set of the next door neighbour's house.

This shift could be considered in several ways. It could prove Williams' point about 'adaptation' – the vaudeville routines disappear because they use up material too quickly, because they make for 'uninteresting' television. Therefore, the play with the television set comes in as a plot device to move the action along, giving George something to do, to keep him on set at times when he is not necessarily involved in the action and to preserve his laconic character in the absence of the vaudeville routine. Seen in this light the *Burns and Allen Show* represents a gradual but uncomplicated alteration or adaptation of the vaudeville routine to fit the demands of an altered technology. Alternatively, grandiose claims could be made for this as an 'alienation-effect' intervening to subvert the audience's relationship with their own television set. Or, without going that far, it could be seen as merely play, a comic device¹¹ whose non-naturalism can be explained by the BBC's notion that 'you can get away with more in comedy' (as in the more recent *Monty Python's Flying Circus* with its continual visual jokes not only on the forms, but also on the flow of television; false-endings, and so on).

Neither of these claims, however, would seem to deal adequately with this device and its historical location in the early days of television. Fundamentally, the device serves as a means of establishing, as a constant source of reference and plenitude, the immediacy of the television image – George watches what we watch as we watch the immediacy and democracy of television. In this early example of a television situation comedy we witness an inscription into the text not only of the television set as a necessary domestic appliance, but also the television viewing situation as guarantor both of the truth of the narrative and of the necessity of watching. George needs to watch it to equip himself with knowledge the other characters do not have – it is his, as it is our 'window-on-the-world'. Placed firmly in the centre of the domestic situation it is the channel through which he receives information about this domestic situation. Far from being an alienation device this particular piece of play serves to establish George as the index of our identification (the inscription into the text of the television-viewer)

11 Indeed, as potential for comedy it is a very successful device – for example, George occasionally accidentally tunes into a 'real' television show, usually that of his show-biz 'rival' Jack Benny, just when he is making a quip about Burns.

68 positioned, as Heath and Skirrow have argued, as 'a citizen in a world of communication',¹² part and parcel of the process of socialisation of family life, of democracy, centre stage in the drama, laughable or not, of life. In this particular instance the device is blatantly, and perhaps successfully, executed, but when we come to look at *Come Back, Mrs Noah*, a BBC situation comedy from the summer of 1978, we will see a similar process in operation although now more can be taken for granted, taken 'as read' – the image of ourselves as television-viewers, however, needing continually to be re-affirmed.

So it becomes clear that during this 'adaptation' a fundamental change has occurred from 'George Burns the vaudeville comedian' to 'George Burns the situation comedy star', even though the routines and characterisation are not that different at all. What is changed has been effected through our repositioning and inscription as television viewers – consciously and blatantly undertaken at this stage perhaps because of the need to familiarise 'the audience' with television as an appliance and as a medium, a familiarisation executed by allowing us to look at ourselves looking. Clearly, this process cannot be reduced to any technical aesthetic explanation of 'the demands of one medium over another'.

Towards a Typology of the Situation Comedy¹³

The necessity to recognize television as signifying practice – a concentration on production as opposed to communication – must allow us to deal with the forms of television (in this instance the 'effectively new form' of the situation comedy) in their formal effectivity, not as aesthetic device or evidence of televisuality. Situation comedies are *series*, as opposed to *serials* and, before a typology of their varieties can be attempted, some of the parameters of the demands of the time-slot must be considered, if only because the idea of the series is such an all-pervasive consciously-held motivating force on the production of television programmes. 'There is within television as it exists at the moment . . . and inbuilt tendency towards the series, towards an idea that is capable of reproduction',¹⁴ a reproduction justifiable in terms of capturing an audience, controlling a time-slot, winning the ratings battle. But more than this the series demands a constant repetition viewable across

12 Heath and Skirrow, op cit, p 58.

13 Credits of British situation comedies can be found in 'Sit-com index' compiled by John Wyver, *Edinburgh International Television Festival 1978 – Official Programme*.

14 M Alvarado and E Buscombe: *Hazell – The Making of a Television Series*, London 1978, p 3.

the terms of the single programme, the single series, the single evening's viewing, leading to Heath and Skirrow's characterisation of 'the central fact of television experience' as 'flow and regularity' ('television, the singular plural') a fact again ultimately irreducible to economic notions of 'the ratings battle' or aesthetic notions of 'limiting conventions' or 'formulae'. In a search for the general conditions of the series we must never lose touch of the signifying value of such conditions, the heterogeneity of their instances.

Philip Drummond has characterized the series in the following way:

'Less over-flowing more strictly episodic than the amorphous "serial" (for instance *Coronation Street* or *Crossroads*), but nonetheless insufficiently discrete to impede the elaboration of a (more or less) continuous internal "mythology" and hermeneutic for the series as a whole, particularly focused by the perpetuity of certain characters. Thus the overarching syntagmatics of the series as a whole, synchronizing motifs of the series dispersed along its linearity, may provide a form of 'overdetermination' for intra-episodic narrative and dramatic cruxes. The extents to which the series "forgets" that is to say "suppresses" this synchronicity, will naturally be of equal signifying value'.¹⁵

The 'situation', to fill the demands of the time-slot, the demands of constant repetition of/in the series, needs to be one whose parameters are easily recognizable and which are returned to week after week. Nothing that has happened in the narrative of the previous week must destroy or even complicate the way the situation is grounded. There are obvious exceptions to this: *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* for one, while classifiable as 'situation comedy' this could not be classified as a series – it started out rather as a serial with a definite temporal and narrative thrust. On the other hand many shows demand, even though the weekly show is a discrete unit, some sort of narrative progression across the series – the idea that the characters have progressed and developed because of learning from their past experiences in the interests of dramatic realism.¹⁶ For example, in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* there was a definite temporal development underlining the narratives of each individual programme: the events leading up to Bob and Thelma's wedding, the honeymoon, the move to the new house, and so on. However, when we look closer at the series *Going Straight* (by the same script-writers, Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais) which also has some temporal development, it will become clear that this never occurs at the expense of the rhythms and problematics of the individual half-hour slot and never leads

15 P Drummond: 'Structural and Narrative Constraints and Strategies in *The Sweeney*', *Screen Education* n20, August 1976, pp 19-20.

16 See the discussions on this in Chapter 4 ('The Scripts') of Hazell, op cit.

70 to a revelation of knowledge which would provide for an ultimate narrative closure to those problematics.

This means, as I have already, albeit tangentially, tried to demonstrate in relation to *The Burns and Allen Show*, that every situation which is established needs to have a fairly rigid inside/outside dichotomy which operates across the levels of characters, stock-sets, use of film-footage (for outside locations) as opposed to studio video-filming, and so on. That is, the dichotomy affects every aspect of the production down to its finest budgetary details. In its least complicated manifestations, events from the outside can be allowed to enter the situation to provide for a weekly narrative development, but these events/characters have to be dealt with in such a way that the parameters of the situation are ultimately unaffected by either their entry or expulsion so that the situation can be maintained and taken up again the following week. This structure, which will be demonstrated with examples from *Going Straight*, seems less to reflect a conservatism about the content of the shows (the above remarks have no necessarily implications on what 'issues' are defined as 'inside' and what as 'outside' – the ideology resides institutionally in the structure)¹⁷ rather it would seem to be a demand of the time-slotting system – the series being such that its basic parameters can be taken up without change, without narrative progress from week to week. Thus, in a six-week situation comedy series such as *Going Straight* there will be six individual dramas, each with its basic narrative development with rhymes and repetitions sustained by running characters, stock sets, basic situational problematics and in which the narrative 'closure' at the end of each programme is 'open' enough to allow structural repetition across the series.

When we attempt to construct a thematic typology of the situation-comedy series we find that the two basic situations used continually over the years are 'home' and 'work'. Again, this seems explicable not as the practitioners would argue, in terms of a focusing of attention on an assumed 'reality' of a sociologically assumed 'audience', whose predominant ideological concerns centre around questions of the family or of work. Rather it would seem that these basic situations provide material for the constant repetition of character and theme, and fit the economic demands of the company's budget in allowing for the use of stock sets, and little or no use of filmed footage. The constant repetition and familiarity – the timeless nowness of television situations – is reflected in the titles of many shows, such as *Happy Ever After*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Are You Being Served?*, *The Train Now Standing*, *Meet The Wife*. Whenever verbs are used in the title of the series

17 See 'Race – Memo to Programme Controllers' Margaret Walters and Sue Woodford, *Edinburgh International Television Festival 1978 – Official programme*, especially section on *Coronation Street*.

they are always in the eternal present. An exception to this is *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* the implication in the title being that this is a question we have asked ourselves about our old favourites since we last saw them. The show, because it was revived after several years' absence, played on the past/present dichotomy continually; the past of the show being the memories of the previous series. Similarly, out of the index for situation comedies over the years¹⁸ there are virtually no shows set in the past. This seems surprising in comparison with the drama departments' almost obsessive pre-occupation with rifling the past.¹⁹ It is even possible to find examples of series set in the past in other usually contemporary genres such as the police series, for example *Sherlock Holmes*, *Lord Peter Wimsey*, *The Mind of Mr J G Reeder* and *Sexton Blake*. It could be argued that these, with the exceptions of the latter, are actually adaptations of novels or short stories and, as such, are to be classed as 'classic serials', much the same as *The World of Wooster* and *The World of Wodehouse* for the comedy series. However, the situation comedy format usually demands contemporaneity. Apart from the Wodehouse adaptations the two other classes of series set in the past are the two Frankie Howerd vehicles (*Up Pompeii* and *Whoops Baghdad*, already mentioned as vehicles for Howerd's stand-up routines) and the recent series, all of which can be seen as spin-offs of the original model *Dad's Army*, viz: *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, *Backs to the Land* and *Get Some In*. All these shows concern aspects of service experience, though none are directly involved with the dramatic possibilities of 'men-at-war' – this is left to the drama and documentary productions. *Dad's Army* involves a Home Guard battalion in a Sussex village, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (the title referring, obviously, to letters back home) a troupe of service entertainers in India in World War Two (written by the same script-writers – Jimmy Perry and David Croft). *Backs to the Land* is about Land Army women, and *Get Some In* (its television model is *The Army Game*) about National Service conscripts in the 1950s. Structurally, all these shows have much in common with the paradigm of the 'work' situation. Why should these thematic concerns and historical locations provide the focus for the statistically minute percentage of situation comedies set in the past? The shows *Backs to the Land* and *Get Some In* are the Anglia and Thames responses to the ratings success of *Dad's Army*, but there is a sense in which the past that is drawn on in these series is not just a past that can be related to by the television viewer ('It was just like that when we were Land Army girls/National Service conscripts') but is rather the past of the character in a television family situation comedy: Mum as a

18 See note 13 above.

19 Examples discussed in 'Television and History' Colin McArthur, BFI Television Monograph n8, London 1978.

72 Land Army worker and Dad as a private before they married, settled down and became Terry and June or George and Mildred or whoever. It would seem that television continually re-instates the terms of its own past, its own memory and our memory of it. The past which the novelistic of television (as memory-spectacle) continually re-appropriates is not only the re-imaging, the 're-mem-bering', of the individual in terms of the coherence of his or her past, it is also, and crucially, the re-affirmation and re-positioning of the individual in relation not only to the past in television, but also to the past of television, and the past or present of the memory or actuality of him or herself as 'television viewer'.²⁰ Interestingly, the only situation comedy which, to my knowledge, is set in the future, *Come Back, Mrs Noah* (to be discussed more fully below) articulates convincingly with this argument. The jokes in the series set in war-time make continual references to rationing, the deprivations of the past, and so on, whereas the jokes in *Mrs Noah* betray a preoccupation with the technological excesses of the future. Both, however, draw on a 'Britain Can Take It', 'England in a crisis', ethos, as if both the past and the future articulate with the present of television viewing in terms of the former being 'just like now but less so' and the latter 'just like now but more so'.

The Home and Family Paradigm

It is not the concern of this article to deal specifically with fiction's investment in family romance²¹ or the centrality of representations of the family in ideology.²² Rather it is to sketch some parameters of the treatment of the family as part of the 'situation' in situation comedy: the model situation which deals with the family as an

20 Cf S Heath 'Screen Images, Film Memory' in *Edinburgh Magazine* '76 pp 33-42. Perhaps this way of looking at the past in television could also provide the context for those discussions reported in *Hazell*, op cit, about the recreating of a 'Chandleresque' film noir style for the series.

21 Freud *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* v IX, pp 237-241; see also S Heath, 'Contexts', *Edinburgh Magazine* '77: 'what is at stake, in fact, constantly, is the definition of forms of individual meaning within the limits of existing social representations and their determining social relations, the provision and maintenance of memories of the individuals a remembering - achieved, coherent, fulfilled.' (p 41); the context for Norman Lear's remarks concerning the aetiology of *All of the Family* from its British prototype *Till Death Us Do Part*. 'But Lear was determined. He fought to get an American Garnett on the screen because, he said: "I loved Alf. He was just like my own father - intolerant and bigoted. We fought at the end of our nerves and the top of our lungs".' Quoted in 'The Gag Man' by Johnny Speight and Ray Galton, *Daily Mirror*, 25 September, 1978.

22 Freud's remarks on jokes about the institution of marriage can be found in 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', *Standard Edition* v VIII pp 110-111.

insular unit and establishes the family as an index of an 'inside/outside' structure of situation comedy. The most typical of the family shows are obviously *Till Death Us Do Part* (the title expressing the endurance of the comic possibilities of the family) and *All in the Family* (whose title expresses its boundary: we do not have to look outside the family for comedy or drama). Other shows place more emphasis on relations between the family and the outside world, usually with neighbours: *Love Thy Neighbour*; *Beggar Your Neighbour*; *Meet the Wife* – an invitation, introduction to the outside world to be drawn into the family drama; and *My Wife Next Door* where the inside/outside structure is fused. In these series the outside elements are essentially institutionalized in stock sets and running characters, the focus of the situation being the way one family unit reacts to another. The ideology held by the institution of television as a machine for the production of meaning is that the family is a sufficiently stable situation, settled enough to be able to bear repetition and to deal with the onslaughts of the outside in a recognizable, characteristic way. If a structural change has to take place it happens before the series begins, or between series. Thus in a series like *The Very Merry Widow*, with Moira Lister, the death of her husband occurs before the series begins and the situation of the series is her coping with bereavement. Again, when the situation changes, new series (spin-offs) may result: thus the change from *Man About the House* to *George and Mildred*, where two characters from the former show now constitute their individual family unit outside the parameters of *Man About the House*.²³

This is obviously very different from the narrative unfolding of the soap-opera, whose structure allows no gaps in the temporality and where the basic situation needs to be broader, encompassing more central characters who can be developed, written out, through time. The parameters of the soap-opera are liable to be a street, a motel, a small village community rather than an individual family unit, a specific place of work, a couple of friends, and so on.

Work

The parameters of a place of work constitute an almost perfect paradigm for a television series, be it a drama series (such as *The*

23 Cf Johnny Speight's remarks on this in relation to *'Till Death Us Do Part'*: '*Till Death* came a little unstuck when Dandy Nichols wanted to leave the series. She was so much a part of the show. I decided the only solution was to kill her off and do a new series with Alf looking around for a new wife. The BBC wouldn't hear of it. They said the death of Alf's "Silly old moo" would upset too many people. In the end we had her going off to Australia. But it was unreal. People knew that a woman like her wouldn't just up and take off for Down Under. The series ended.' *Daily Mirror* Thursday, 28 September, 1978, p 13.

- 74 *Brothers*), a police series (such as Dock Green police station) or situation comedy. The situation demands a stability of character and problematic (doctors *always* heal patients; people working in a store *always* serve customers) a clearly defined boundary between staff and customers, doctors and patients, (allowing for a continual turnover of the latter who can enter and leave the situation naturally – the difficult customer, the patient with an unusual complaint, and so on). The situation also allows for the representation of class differences through its treatment of the different hierarchical grades, ranks, of the running characters. In this model's purest form the action takes place within the confines of the work situation, with only marginal reference to the lives of the characters outside (*Are You Being Served?*, *The Rag Trade*). Other situation comedies incorporate aspects of the home/work dichotomy (for example, *On the Buses* with its stock sets of the depot and Reg Varney's house), others even fuse the terms of this dichotomy completely, often by dealing with the 'small family-firm' (for example, *Fawlty Towers*, *Steptoe and Son*) where emphasis can be switched from one pole to the other, perhaps allowing for greater flexibility (the television prototype of this being *The Dick Van Dyke Show*).

The Third Model

This model betrays structural elements of both the home and the work paradigms and usually concerns a group of diverse people somehow connected in a situation outside that of their work-place. It usually concerns the home, but not the family except tangentially as part of the 'outside', for instance, *Man About the House*, *Rising Damp* and *Come Back, Mrs Noah*, where the situation concerns a group of diverse characters orbiting the earth in an accidentally launched space-station, a situation which provides little scope for boundary flexibility!

Characters

The necessity for the continuity of character and situation from week to week allows for the possibility of comedy being generated by the fact that the characters are somehow stuck with each other. In the family situation this is obvious (we think of 'we choose our friends, but fate gives us our relations': also the possibility for in-law jokes – are they family or not-family?). At work it usually turns around the possibility that we can choose our jobs, but not the people we work with no matter how glamorous our job may be (as in *Doctor on the Go*). It is as if the formal necessities of the series provide the existential circle from which the characters cannot escape. We think of Harold Steptoe continually threatening to leave his father (a possibility the series could never

allow, but continually took into account) or the literalisation of this demand in *Porridge*: by setting the situation in a prison the characters had no possibility of escaping the parameters of that situation; when Fletch-Ronnie Barker eventually gets paroled, a new series, a new situation is created – hence *Going Straight*. 75

'Going Straight'

The series *Going Straight* illustrates many of the general remarks made in the previous section but has also been chosen because its initial paradigm is somewhat more complicated in its development than many of television's situation comedy offerings. Some initial points need to be made. First, situation comedies are often characterized from within television as being specifically 'the brain-child of a writer'²⁴ – the writers of this series are Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, known for their ratings and critical successes, *The Likely Lads* and *Porridge*. Second, the idea for *Going Straight* is a direct spin-off from *Porridge*, which itself was a 'vehicle' for Ronnie Barker. *Going Straight* therefore carries, in spite of the change of situation, a set of familiar running characters: Fletch-Barker himself, his cell-mate Godber and his daughter Ingrid (familiar to us through her prison visits). Therefore, it carries with it a memory of the hermeneutic of the previous series, which provides a double-definition of the 'inside/outside' structure: the first is the one between series (inside prison/outside in the world: *Porridge/Going Straight*); the second the one set up by the problematic of the show, which will be dealt with later. The show also carries with it an initial hermeneutic question, which is easily established because of our knowledge of the previous series, as the *Radio Times* put it: 'He is determined to go straight . . . but will he?', a question the series will be asking throughout its six-week run. Thirdly, as a series, a specific time-slot, *Going Straight* must present itself as 'an idea capable of reproduction'. However, as part of that idea grounds itself on a memory of the past (we know that Fletch used to be in gaol – now he is not) a temporality is, of necessity,

24 Philip Jones, Thames Controller of Light Entertainment, writing in the *IBA Handbook – Television and Radio 1978*. This view was also assumed by Michael Grade (London Weekend Television's Director of Programmes) at the symposium on stereotypes at the Edinburgh International Television Festival 1978 – when answering claims that British television was not brave enough to handle 'hot' issues in comedy shows he maintained that television practitioners had been 'betrayed by writers', and that 'our leading dramatists were scared to write comedy'. For a counter-position held by writers see Speight and Galton's series 'The Gag Men', in the *Daily Mirror*, week beginning 25 September 1978. They take the view that the restrictions which the 'petrified liberals and so-called guardians of our morality' impose on the television comedy script-writer are becoming ever more rigid.

76 set up. Therefore, the scriptwriters have to deal with this temporality without destroying, or even altering, the parameters of the situation.

It is necessary at this point to describe an episode from the series in some detail in order to arrive at the terms of this paradigm and then to see how it is maintained from week to week. The episode chosen is the third to be broadcast: *Going Sour* which went out on Friday, 10th March 1978 in the 8.30 pm slot, and was retransmitted on Friday, 3rd November 1978 at 8.00 pm. The third show of the series was chosen to demonstrate how the rhythms, repetitions, movements of a series continue across its developments. It might be thought that this could be demonstrated in relation to the first episode of a series: in this case the first episode of *Going Straight* dealt with the transition from inside to outside and took place almost completely on the train from Slade prison (site of *Porridge*) to Fletch's London home (site of *Going Straight*).

'Going Sour' – Brief Plot Description

No formal analysis of this episode was possible so this description tends to foreground narrative and script at the expense of other factors.

CREDITS The credits of the series both establish the inside/outside theme (the film of Fletch being released from prison and looking bewildered at his first view of the outside world) and also emphasise the regularity and flow of the time-slot. Also, the title of the series (*Going Straight*) articulates with the title of each of the episodes (which all start with the word 'going') in creating both a direction, a duration and a memory (of Fletch when he was in prison and therefore not going anywhere). The theme-tune, sung by Barker, emphasises the patent hermeneutic of the show ('He is determined to go straight . . . but will he?') and refers to that determination, which will continually come under assault,

'I'm going straight I am, straight as an arrow,
I've paid me price and done me time,
I'm going straight I am, back on the straight and narrow
And I don't mean straight back to crime.'

SCENE ONE Stock set of Fletch's living-room. Jokes to reinforce Fletch's maladjustment to outside life (Fletch is up at seven putting up shelves – 'I learned carpentry in the nick' – which later fall down) and his lack of status in the family (his lack of conversational rapport with his son Raymond, compared with his role as 'father-figure' to Henry Godber in the 'nick').

SCENE TWO Stock set of the kitchen. More assaults on Fletch's lack of position and status outside the prison world he is used to. Fletch's reference to the 'attitude of cynicism and mistrust around in this country'. Assaults on his manhood and demonstration of his inadequacy: daughter Ingrid asks him to do the shopping. Narrative prepared by her giving him money, which his pride declines – she puts it under the Jubilee tea-caddy. Ingrid questions Fletch about his apparent lack of sex-drive, preparing the way for his encounter with Penny.

SCENE THREE Set of a Café run by Dante, an Italian, where a tripartite schema of middle-aged male sexuality is drawn up, Fletch's lack of sexual appetite ('that stuff they put in the prison tea must be starting to work') contrasting with Dante's brazen masculine sexuality and Perce, the milkman's, position as butt for jokes about his sexual possibilities on a milk-round. A narrative device to test the hermeneutic of the series enters at this point in the figure of Penny, a teenage runaway, whom Fletch stops from stealing Perce's money-bag. Fletch is in a position to re-establish his role as an old lag with a knowledge of the world in relation to Penny, but also to diffuse the jokes about his sexual inadequacy. His lack of status and manhood is over-ridden in the knowledge and experience he can give Penny.

SCENE FOUR Stock set of Fletch's living-room. Penny tells her story – the entry of an ideological issue 'teenage runaways' into the hermeneutic which is established as 'Will Fletch be able to re-establish himself as a figure of wisdom, status and authority in a world which is incomprehensible to him?', reinforcing the overall hermeneutic of the series 'Will Fletch succeed in his determination to go straight and withstand the onslaughts of a cynical and distrustful world?'. The 'I don't care' attitude of Penny is equated by Fletch with the general mood of the times, but here he can intervene with his own story and advice and stop Penny following the same course as himself. Comedy is virtually forgotten in this scene through the need to recreate Fletch as a father-figure.

SCENE FIVE Stock set of Fletch's kitchen. Ingrid returns and Fletch explains Penny's presence. Ingrid responds as if Fletch has made sexual advances to her which allows Fletch the opportunity of a soliloquy emphasizing the importance of helping people, maintaining he was 'just trying to help somebody – an alley cat, a little waif and stray'. As he delivers this speech there is a short cut back to the sitting-room where we see Penny stealing Ingrid's purse. It is at this point that the first narrative movement of the show is concluded: Fletch's attempts to withstand the cynicism of the world have again come under attack. Fletch has re-established his role as father-figure, a possessor of knowledge in relation to young

- 78 people (a role he had inside, but which his family deny him) only to have this attempt exposed as naïveté – the world has made a fool of Fletch again – he would be better off inside:

SCENE SIX Stock set of the kitchen after a passage of time. Fletch's face betrays the shattering of his faith in human nature. Ingrid's attempts to cheer him up are in vain as he adopts the attitude of cynicism he was earlier trying to combat ('my lost faith in human nature won't be restored by watching Orient play Mansfield Town'). At this point, Arthur (Penny's stepfather) enters with Penny who has returned the purse (she 'thought better of it'). Fletch is obviously overjoyed as it is clear he had been listened to – Arthur wants to thank Fletch alone in the sitting-room and Penny remains in the kitchen.

SCENE SEVEN Stock set of the kitchen. Fletch again with Ingrid, but this time in high spirits. At this point Fletch delivers a speech which needs quoting in full since its direction is that of the series week after week. Fletch says:

'I bet missionaries feel like that – I mean it can't be all beer and skittles out in the jungle with the heat and the titsy [sic] flies. When one day in come a group of young warriors – throw down their spears and say "we want to learn the catechism" – then they eat him.'

That this speech is a model for the drama as a whole becomes clear when immediately afterwards Fletch decides to take the whole family out for an evening at the pub using the money which Ingrid offered him in Scene Two and which she left under the Jubilee tea-caddy. Of course, when Fletch looks for it, it has gone ('Gor blimey – she's pinched the fiver!'). The scene ends and the credits come up ('You have been watching . . .') on a freeze-frame of Fletch's face as the cynicism of the world pours down on him again – thus making for the final movement of the narrative which allows the re-instatement of the series' problematic: 'He is determined to go straight . . . but will he? (in such a cynical world)'.

The structure of this episode (which is the structure of each episode of the series) could be expressed diagrammatically thus:

Initial Paradigm – The memory of 'Porridge'

Inside

Fletch in prison
[father/authority-figure]

Outside

Fletch on the outside
[outsider, with no sexual, economic
or familial status – no knowledge
of how things work]

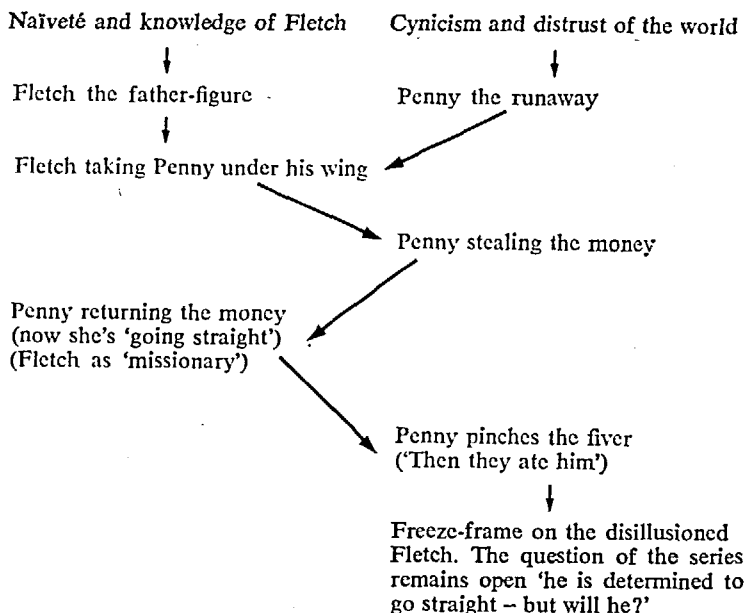
Inside

Fletch’s code of conduct
[trust, resolve to go straight.
naïveté, yet need to display know-
ledge]

Outside

Fletch’s attitude that cynicism and distrust are prevalent in the world – the world’s conspiracy to think the worst of all his intentions. (This allows for weekly entry of narrative elements: Penny in *Going Sour*, the con who offers him a job in episode six, and so on)

Movement of this episode through these parameters:



It is clear that the narrative of each episode of the series must not allow for a resolution of the two sides or the problematic/hermeneutic of the show would be eliminated, another ‘situation’ would have to be established, another series written. Every episode ends with the freeze-frame of Fletch’s disillusionment – the flow of the series (though not, of course, the flow of television – ‘now it is time for the *Nine O’clock News*’) is held in abeyance until the same time next week when the terms of its movements, its rhymes and repetitions, will be re-activated in its regular time-slot. The organization of the novelistic and the organization of television harmonise – at the point at which Fletch tries to re-establish his position as father (by taking the whole family out for a celebration

80 and footing the bill) this is confounded – it is not a possibility or it would finish the series with three weekly time-slots left to be filled.

Any attempt to deal with television situation comedy written at this time must consider the remarks of Norman Lear at this year's Edinburgh International Television Festival; and if only because his speech was greeted so enthusiastically by British television practitioners and was widely reported in the press, it deserves to be contextualized here. Lear's speech, and most of the ensuing debates at Edinburgh centred predominantly, at least in the sphere of situation comedy, on the need to incorporate the 'issues of the day' into the half-hour comedy slot. Norman Lear's proud list of 'toppled taboos'²⁵ achieved in his shows bear witness to this:

'For the first time we saw: married couples in the same bed. Our stories dealt with death, infidelity, black family life, homosexuality, abortion, criticism of the economic and foreign policy, racial prejudice, problems of the elderly, alcoholism, drug abuse, menopause, the *male* mid-life crisis. Such health issues as heart disease, hypertension, breast cancer, lung cancer, mental retardation, depression, manic depression, plastic surgery and more.'²⁶

The task of the 'concerned' member of the 'creative community' of television practitioners becomes to find the humour inherent in 'whatever life struggle is going on around me'. Here we see the language of heroism in the service of getting 'substantive content' onto television: the braveness of the shows dealing with contemporary issues; the temerity of the network-programmers in finding them too hot to handle. For Lear, the alternative is clear: those programmes which do not deal with the 'real problems of life' are 'shouting the largest message in the world'; they are, by omission, saying:

'You have no race problems; there is no economic concern in the nation, we are *not* in trouble in Vietnam; everyone does have an equal crack at medical attention; there are no problems with the

25 It is interesting that Time Magazine spoke of Lear's shows, such as *'All in the Family'*, *'Stanford and Son'*, *'Maude'*, as 'toppling taboos', while the Annan report talks of 'crossing frontiers' 'Broadcasting continues to entertain and stimulate by crossing frontiers' (Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, March 1977, Cmnd 6753, section 16.4): the former seeming to be resonant of the language of medieval chivalry; the latter of 19th century colonial expansionism and exploration.

26 Norman Lear, MacTaggart Lecture, Edinburgh, op cit.

poor or the elderly or the uneducated – and all mothers and fathers and children live in absolute harmony’.

81

Clearly, this position contains fundamental assumptions about the role of television in society, and about the nature of the audience. If, as Heath and Skirrow have argued, television is ‘an apparatus for the production and the reproduction of the novelistic’ which ‘serves to address the problem of the definition of forms of individual meaning within the limits of existing social representations and their determining social relations, the provision and maintenance of terms of social intelligibility’,²⁷ then we can initially contextualize Lear’s call for a greater ‘realism’, a greater ‘humanism’, a greater degree of ‘substantive content’ in television situation comedy as a call for an organization of the television novelistic which takes a greater account of contemporary issues. This position necessarily assumes that society and television are two wholly distinct realms: one concerned with ‘reality’ – the domain of the ‘real problems of life’ – the other somehow concerned with reflecting that reality, whilst not being part of it. Television exists outside society and is answerable to society only to the extent to which television adequately reflects its concerns.²⁸ the idea of the process of representation as something which exists outside society can be seen in the assumptions which are made about the audience. The audience of television exists to be ‘entertained, informed, offended and provoked’, by seeing its problems (‘the real problems of everyday life’) reflected in the television programmes it chooses to watch (a mass audience, composed of ‘citizens of a free society’ exercising their rights as individual consumers). The notion of ‘entertainment’ itself is always defined in opposition to ‘work’, to ‘everyday life’. For example: ‘After the tensions and anxieties of everyday life, people welcome the opportunity to sit down, relax, and *be made* to smile and laugh’ (*IBA Handbook 1978*, section on situation comedy, p 89, my emphasis).

Thus, these assumptions are belied by the practice of television, by the constant and relentless need of the programmes we watch to inscribe the television viewer into the organization of the novelistic. Constant and relentless because as a process it is incapable of final closure: it is readable across the individual shows, series, evening’s viewings, and so on, but can never hold us there as it is part of the more general process by which we are constituted as social beings, one which the very forms the situation comedy takes seem designed to reinforce.

27 Heath and Skirrow, *op cit*, pp 58-59.

28 So a call goes up in Britain: ‘Britain today is a multi-racial society, but you’d hardly know it by watching an average evening’s television. Despite the fact that a whole generation of non-whites born here are growing up British, there are still pitifully few black or brown faces on the screen – or behind it!’ M Walters and S Woodford, *op cit*, p 27.

82 So, in conclusion, I have chosen to look at some aspects of the organization of the novelistic in a show which apparently eschews any humanistic treatment of 'hot' social issues, from a need not to be sidetracked into dealing with the 'treatment' of those issues. Although the section of the programme to be considered does contain tangential references to industrial unrest, immigration, rising population, technological progress, and so on, it does so only in relation to the continual re-inscription of the television viewer into the text of the programme, '*Come Back, Mrs Noah*' – the apotheosis of the citizen in a world of messages.

'Come Back, Mrs Noah'

Come Back, Mrs Noah is set in the year 2050, and stars Mollie Sugden as the Housewife of the Year, accidentally launched into space. One element of its inter-textual references is its specific relation to other television programmes both science-fiction, for instance *Star Trek*, *Dr Who*, and science-documentary, for instance *Tomorrow's World*. However, as already mentioned, the show is bound up in references to the past: the theme music is a deliberate recreation of 1920s or 1930s music, Mollie Sugden as a television figure embodies characteristics of a cultural past (fat women in sea-side postcards, a northern accent, jokes about knickers, and so on) as well as a television past (playing Mrs Hutchinson in *The Liver Birds* and Mrs Slocombe in *Are You Being Served?*). The show is a vehicle for Mollie Sugden as the space station is a (literal) vehicle for the parameters of the situation. *Come Back, Mrs Noah* was scripted by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft (who also scripted *Are You Being Served?*) the latter of whom was the co-writer of both *Dad's Army* and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*. He also produced all the above shows. The title itself defines the parameters of the show: *Come Back, Mrs Noah*, referring not only to the attempts to get the module back to earth again, but also, through the use of the imperative, suggesting a calling-back, an interpellation back to the terms of our comprehension of the present/past, away from the fear of the technological excesses of the future, whose terms are continually being lampooned.

The first pilot show of the six-week series was shown in February 1978 as a 'taste of things to come' – the rest of the series was to be shown, as it were, in the future – and was then repeated as a preview to the other five episodes in July 1978. I have chosen a section from the second episode 'In Orbit' (broadcast on BBC 1 at 6.30 pm on Monday, 17 July 1978) for, although this is the second of the six shows, it acts, in effect, as the first of the new series. The first show 'introduced' the characters and situation and provided the diegetic explanation as to how they managed

to be marooned in space – the rest of the series involves their adventures up there and the attempts to get them down. However, before that is possible the characters and the situation have to be redefined – re-presented – to us and the terms by which that is achieved will be the focus of this analysis. 83

Episode 2: 'In Orbit'

I Shots 1-3

Shot	Time*	Description	Dialogue
1	3.75	<i>Farandwide</i> titles – music fade into	



Nationwide end title



1

2	91.5	MCU of <i>Farandwide</i> announcer reading the news. No camera movement in this shot but periodically at points† news stills are flashed behind him onto a screen: †photo of Orkneys †photo of outside of a factory †photo of space station (a)
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†photo of House of Commons

Farandwide Announcer:
'Hello, good evening and welcome to the 7,582nd edition of *Farandwide* for today, Thursday 23rd June 2050. In tonight's programme we will be taking an in-depth look at proposals for the new London Airport – in the Orkneys.† And on the Industrial front† at the British Leyland Robot Factory – arm and leg fitters have been laid off due to a strike in the tool room. But first† the subject that's on everybody's lips: the accidental launching of Britannia 7, Britain's multi-million pound space station from the Pontefract International Space Complex – otherwise known as PISC. There were angry scenes† in the Commons today as various motions were tabled by the joint Labour-Con-

* In this and the following tables shot times are given in seconds.

Dialogue

servative opposition. Speakers pointed out that so far we had managed to put into orbit two mathematicians, one cleaner, a BBC reporter and a housewife – at a total cost of 700 million pounds. Was this a good way of spending even our vast resources? In reply the Prime Minister said that he had already set up a Royal Commission to look into the whole matter. This is the strongest measure any Government could take short of actually doing something about it. And now sport† – Britain's heavyweight champion, Ram Jam Patel last night retained his world-title against the Italian, Ping-Dong Schlossnoy . . .

†picture of boxing ring



2



2a

- 3 6.75 LS inside module from behind of four characters watching the screen: Mrs Noah; Clive (BBC Reporter); Carstairs and Fanshaw (mathematicians)

Mrs Noah: 'How can they talk about sport when we're marooned up here 350 miles above the earth?



3

The programme re-introduces and re-instates its parameters through a news programme. *Come back, Mrs Noah* went out after *Nation-wide* and the *Farandwide* logo and theme music is identical to that programme – already we are inscribed into the text as television watchers: the news as our source of information on the issues of the world/*Farandwide* as our source of information on the issues of *Come Back Mrs Noah*. Reference to contemporary issues in the context of a news broadcast emphasises the future as ‘just like today – only more so’. The scene inside the module, with the crew of Britannia 7 watching the broadcast again puts the screen at the centre of its terms of intelligibility: the two mathematicians belong to the world of science fiction and technology, Clive Cunliffe belongs to the world of broadcasting, Mrs Noah, the Housewife of the Year, is positioned like us, as television viewer.

85

II Shots 6-10

Shot	Time*	Description	Dialogue
6	6	MLS of module from in front with four characters in frame	<i>Carsairs</i> : ‘Why don’t we switch through to mission control – see if they’ve worked out a way of getting us down from here?’
7	2	As shot 3 with Mission Control on monitor screen	<i>Mission Controller</i> : (aside) ‘Well, I’ve got no idea how to get them down.’
8	5	MCU of Mission Control	<i>Female Assistant</i> : ‘Hm, excuse me, sir . . .’
9	4	MCU Mission Controller looking and speaking at TV monitors of the module	<i>Mission Controller</i> : ‘Oh hello Tip-Top-Mish-Con here. Is everything all right? Down here we’re straining every nerve to do everything we possibly can’.



6



9

10 3 As shot 8

Tea-woman: ‘One lump or two controller?’

- 86 Again, the axis of the comedy in this section is on the claims of technology/the reality behind those claims, but information is relayed through the institution of watching – the Mission Controller sees the crew of the module, like us, through a TV monitor (significantly black and white) although, his set does more than ours – he can communicate direct.

III Shots 20-21

Shot	Time*	Description	Dialogue
20	6	As shot 3	<i>Mission Controller:</i> 'We do have some good news for you. We've assembled one or two family and friends at the <i>Farandwide</i> studio so you can have a chat with them'.
21	24	MCU <i>Farandwide</i> studios – desk with announcer and guests	<i>'Farandwide' Announcer</i> (to the guests): 'Well, to put it quite plainly the chances of getting them back alive are very remote, but they don't know that yet. The fact that they're doomed to spend the rest of their lives in that space coffin must never enter their heads'. <i>Technician:</i> 'On the Air'. <i>Announcer:</i> 'Oh God – Hello Britannia 7, well you'll be pleased to know that we've assembled some of your nearest and dearest in the studio to pay their last respects . . . er, to say hello to you.'

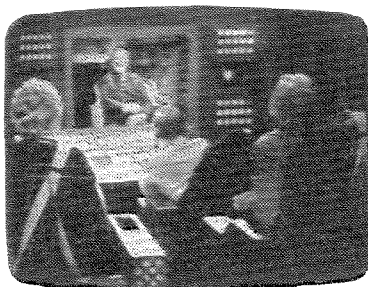


Here, television is not only the medium of communicability, but also the medium of domesticity. The *Farandwide* announcer medi-

ates constantly in the following shots between the crew and their family on earth: stopping the broadcast when Mrs Carstairs breaks down, relaying information about Fanshaw's wife and brother, and so on. Again, the joke about what we are allowed or not allowed to see is used: the knowledge that we are perhaps having the wool pulled over our eyes is part of our definition as television viewers, but it is celebrated here along with every other aspect of that definition/inscription.

IV Shots 29-36

<i>Shot</i>	<i>Time*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
29	7	As shot 3	'And now here's a lovely surprise for Mrs Noah – we've taken a camera over to your very own home Mrs Noah, where your very own husband is waiting to give you a word of comfort.'
30	1.5	CU Mrs Noah	Mr Noah: 'Hello, love'.
31	1	As shot 29	



31

32	2.75	As shot 30	Mrs Noah: 'Ee, look at him'.
33	12	As shot 29	Mr Noah: 'Here I am in our own little nest at number 36. In front of the fire we've shared so often together – I know you must be very worried about me, love, but don't fret – in England in a crisis there's always a neighbour to help out and I've chosen one from number 38
34	15	MCU Mr Noah (filmed at home)	next door – that's right,

88	<i>Shot</i>	<i>Time*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
35	1.5		LS of Ivy entering the room	you've guessed it - it's none other than Ivy Basset, so sadly widowed last year.



34



35

36	17	As 34 with Mr Noah and Ivy in frame	Although we're far apart it's a great comfort to me to know that every two hours you're passing over our little house at 35,000 miles an hour - so it's goodbye from me, the cats, the parrot and all at Number 36.'
----	----	-------------------------------------	--

Throughout this section the specific televisual references are those sections on *This is Your Life* where the guest is unable to appear in the studio and is therefore filmed at home. Mr Noah's diction throughout is deliberately stilted, as if he's talking to a television camera. Interestingly, the decor of No 36 and Mr Noah's dress has no futuristic over-tones ('I'm in front of the fire', 'the cats and the parrot') so that although the discourse of the future can be contained in the figures of the mathematicians and the staff of Mission Control, and the discourse of Mr and Mrs Noah's domesticity is seen to be defined outside that, it cannot be defined outside the discourse of television itself - the mediator between Mr and Mrs Noah. The fire Mr Noah is sitting in front of is in fact the television camera recording his words.

V Shots 42-43

<i>Shot</i>	<i>Time*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
42	16	As shot 3 - occupants of the module watching Farandwide Announcer	And now a word to you all - keep your spirits up. Remember this is the 21st Century and working on your problems are the scientific brains and resources and the latest technol . . .
Sign flashes up on screen:			(breakdown)

<i>Shot</i>	<i>Time*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Dialogue</i>
43	6	'We apologise for loss of sound and vision'. As shot 6: MLS front in front of characters in the module	Clive: 'That's a great relief I must say!'

After this opening the series can, in effect, start with the antics of the marooned passengers on board the space station and deal more directly with the sci-fi and technological lampoonings that are the mainstay of its comic resources. However, we have seen how this requires an instatement of ourselves as television-watchers in the present, even at the expense (for the comedy) of introducing television as something that goes wrong and something which hides the truth, as well as something from which we receive information and which guarantees, provides the expression for, the family wit. In this programme, almost as literally as in the Burns and Allen shows of the early 1950s, television viewing is inscribed into the situation comedy format, interpellating us into the world of ideas and information and holding us there by a celebration of our own subject position as television viewer.

Postscript

Throughout this article my concerns have been, to specify the parameters of the situation comedy and to examine the organization of the novelistic in its inscription of the television viewer. Therefore, I have chosen, deliberately, to emphasise the 'situation' at the expense of 'the comedy' – the question of 'how the programme was funny', is only tangentially broached here. Not that to do so would be at odds with the analysis advanced – indeed, quite the contrary. There is room for work on Freud's characterisation of humour as the action of the 'kind' super-ego²⁹ in relation to television situation comedy as there is, more directly, to the role of the third person in jokes:³⁰ how does the role of the third person inscribed in the practice of joke-telling articulate with the spectator-positions outlined in the parameters of television situation comedy and, indeed, the television institution as a whole?

²⁹ *Standard Edition* v XXII p 159.

³⁰ Chapters 3, 5 and 7 of 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', *Standard Edition* v VIII.

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Porter, or Ambivalence*

Noël Burch

The work of Edwin S Porter – in so far as it is known to me, at least¹ – is a locus of contradictions which informed the development of the cinema in its beginnings. Among professional historians, circumscribed as they are, no matter what their orientation in other respects, by the linear view which has hitherto proved such a serious hindrance to any attempt to evolve a materialist theory of the history of the cinema, Porter's films have aroused entirely contradictory attitudes. Three may be distinguished, each corresponding to one of the main ideological positions which turn by turn have hindered any systematic examination of this period.

First there is the prevailing thesis concerning these beginnings, according to which a language gradually emerged out of a sort of primordial chaos generally described as 'theatrical': the language, the cinema's *natural language*, innate in the camera from the outset, but only brought into the light of day as the result of determined efforts by certain 'pioneers of genius'. From which it follows that the prescribed approach for anyone wishing to study this period is the enumeration of 'firsts': 'the first close-up', 'the first match cut', 'the first parallel montage', and so on *ad nauseam*. And although the deliberate falsification of documents in support of some film-maker or other's claims to priority is not entirely

* This article will be appearing in 1979 in *Le Cinéma Américain, approche textuelle*, Raymond Bellour ed, Flammarion, Paris.

¹ Eight films out of the fifty-odd which have survived: *The Life of an American Cowboy*, *The Life of an American Fireman*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *Romance of the Rails* (all 1903); *Rounding Up the Yeggmen* (1904); *Dream of a Welsh Rarebit Fiend* (1906); *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1907). *Romance of the Rails*, one of the earliest advertising films I have seen, is remarkable chiefly for a long tracking shot behind a train; *The Dream of a Welsh Rarebit Fiend* is a pleasant trick film in the Pathé manner; *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* is absolutely typical of the general advance of the American cinema in 1907, but is otherwise unremarkable. I limit myself to a closer analysis of the four major films of 1903.

92 proven, what is certain is that the proper thoroughness was not displayed in the examination of certain documents, as I mention below. It was under the criterion of this pursuit of 'firsts' that many historians felt, like Lewis Jacobs,² that they could establish Porter as the 'inventor of cinematic language'. No such assertion, of course, in no matter what area, is admissible today.

Without departing from this linear and teleological view, other historians who stress the 'popular charms' of the primitive cinema, and who feel no obligation to argue precedence for Porter, fall into the opposite extreme: they see in Porter only a common plagiarist (I shall return to the ideological ramifications of this interesting accusation), largely outstripped as an 'artist' by the French film-makers and as a 'pioneer' by the English. This is the attitude of Deslandes and Richard, but also, to a certain extent, of their *bête noire*, Georges Sadoul.³

Lastly, another attitude seems to have been emerging over the past few years, linked more or less to the notion that the primitive cinema was a sort of Paradise Lost, 'regained' today thanks to the various avant-garde movements. As early as 1962 Professor Gessner⁴ felt he could trace the seeds for *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* in the unusual montage of *The Life of an American Fireman*, while other writers like to contrast the 'avant-gardism' of Méliès with the 'conformism' of Porter, Griffith et al.

To understand why the adherents of a linear history – and as one sees, their ideological horizons can be very different – seem unable to read Porter's films, a brief examination of the forces working on the cinema at this period is necessary. Also relevant would be an analysis, not of the spontaneous emergence of some 'natural' language, but of the establishment of a mode of representation, historically and culturally determined, and of the conditions which enabled it to continue exercising an almost absolute hegemony over Western film production down to the present day. Such an analysis lies outside the scope of the present article, but my examination of some of Porter's films, which expose the first stages of the process, will provide some clues towards its explanation. First, however, a consideration of the contradictory forces that were working on the emergent cinema even before 1895, is necessary before I go on to describe how these forces were to exercise contradictory influences on these films of Porter's.

As the investigations I am conducting stand at present, I dis-

2 *The Rise of the American Film*, first published New York, 1939, reprinted, New York, 1968.

3 Jacques Deslandes, *Histoire comparée du cinéma: v1 De la cinématique au cinématographe, 1826-1896*, Tournai 1966; v2, with Jacques Richard, *Du cinématographie au cinéma, 1896-1906*, Tournai, 1968.

Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, 3rd ed, Paris, 1973 – continuing.

4 Robert Gessner: 'Porter and the Creation of Cinematic Motion', *Journal of the Society of Cinematologists* vII, 1962.

tinguish three forces or historical and cultural trends which moulded the cinema during its first two decades.⁵ Chief among these, obviously, was the aggregate of folk art kept alive by the urban working classes in Europe and the United States at the turn of the century. These comprise both modes of representation and narrative or gestural material deriving from melodrama, vaudeville, pantomime (in England), conjuring, music hall and circus; from caricatures, the 'penny plain, tuppence coloured' sheets, strip cartoons; from magic lantern shows in the home,⁶ the street and the theatre; from street entertainers, fairground acts,⁷ waxwork shows. The corollary to these circumstances (both cause and effect) was that in its early days the cinema addressed itself exclusively to the urban 'lower classes', and that its practitioners were for the most part still 'of humble origin'. It is therefore not surprising that for at least ten years the more affluent turned up their noses at the cinema, and that the middle classes contented themselves with sending their children (naturally) and the latter's nurses or sometimes (it came to the same thing) their mothers and grandmothers to these dubious places where all one saw was pictures reflecting, 'in form and content', *the infantilism of the working classes*.

The cinema, however, was developing within a society governed by certain specific production relationships. It would have been unthinkable that it might be 'immunised', that it might escape the underlying pressures⁸ exercised by the specifically bourgeois modes of representation – this being my second 'force' – from literature, painting, and especially the theatre, which were then in their heyday. Moreover, although a film might very occasionally mirror the aspirations and struggles of the popular masses, the substance of the great majority of films at this period reflects,

5 The present article has been produced in connection with a wider study with Jorge Dana relating to the genealogy of the mode of representation characteristic of the institution of cinema.

6 Aimed, it should be stressed, at the *children* of the bourgeoisie, like all scientific toys such as the zoetrope or the praxinoscope which foreshadowed the projection of moving pictures. A fascinating study could be made of the relationship between the popular *presentational* arts (circus, puppets, etc) and an audience of middle class children not yet broken in to the codes of the *representational* arts of their class.

7 One of the most important features of the early fairground cinema in England and France was the lecturer, a barker who lured passers-by into the booth, then delivered a commentary during the screening whose 'distancing' effect became literally unbearable around 1910 with the development of 'absorbing' techniques in the dominant narrativity. The American lecturer, whose social implications were quite different, derived from the tradition of the slide-show lecture.

8 Transmitted, in particular, through the medium of a specialized press which, in America at least, developed rapidly after 1905. Cf Skauffman and Henstall (eds), *American film criticism from the beginnings to 'Citizen Kane'*, New York, 1972.

directly or indirectly, the viewpoint imposed by the ruling classes. But this had been true of the English melodrama, for instance, since its birth: only one or two 'factory melodramas' at the beginning of the 19th century took up positions of class struggle (and, as with the primitive cinema, this was usually a matter of opportunism on the part of lower middle class playwrights addressing themselves to a working class audience). Nevertheless, the melodrama undoubtedly constituted a theatrical form quite distinct from those of the bourgeois theatre. So for the first ten years of the cinema's existence, linearity, haptic screen space and the individualisation of characters are features to be found only incidentally here and there. They still figure largely as elements dominated, in particular, by others of popular origin. But between 1908 and 1915 this relationship was to undergo a gradual reversal, principally because of the economic development of the cinema and the resulting need to attract an audience with more money and leisure at its disposal.

A third force, which I shall call 'scientistic', also presided over this first period of development; and for a while its role, *in conjunction with the modes of popular representation*, was wholly determinative. This 'scientism' certainly figured as an element of dominant ideology, but it was also linked to genuinely scientific practices; and it was in this respect that it was to influence the early cinema in a way directly opposed to the impetus given by those arts on which the bourgeois era had already left its mutable mark. On a strictly technological level, the first moving pictures came most directly out of experiments by Muybridge, Marey, and other researchers whose goal was most certainly not the restitution or representation of movement, but simply its *analysis*. The physiologist Marey considered himself satisfied when, by means of the various ingenious instruments and apparatus he had constructed for the purpose, he had succeeded in *breaking down* human and animal movement into successive photographic images. Yet only a small further step remained, still from a strictly technological point of view, for engineers like Auguste and Louis Lumière, or Edison and Dickson, to complete these experiments by synthesising the movement that had been thus decomposed.

Already adumbrated between these two first steps towards the entertainment cinema, however – by the Lumières and by the Edison team – are the terms of the contradiction which was to govern this whole first period. Edison, for whom the recording and reproduction of moving images was merely – and this is significant – an extension of his earlier (and very profitable) invention of the phonograph, had set as the goal of his first experiments in this new area the recording and mass distribution of *opera* (an echo of the ideology of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*). And one of the 'cinema' devices which emerged from his laboratories, the *kineto-*

phonograph – whose lone spectator, in the sensory isolation of its twin eye-pieces and headphones, received more or less synchronous images and sounds – was a striking prefiguration of the conditions of cushioned darkness to be met with in the picture palaces of the 1930s. At the opposite extreme of the production line, it was Edison's collaborators who also constructed a studio foreshadowing the first sound stages, and on it shot what was probably the first real moving picture close-up: *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1895). It seems to me indicative of the profound nature of the forces which were thus already at work on the emergent cinema that the stipulation from the journalist who initiated this film was that the close-up should show a *pretty girl sneezing*. It was purely for reasons of expediency, it appears, that Dickson happened to use his assistant, Fred Ott, thus frustrating his 'client' of the orgasmic image of his desires. But Raff and Gammon, sub-contractors of the Edison/Dickson processes, were soon to make the erotic vocation of the close-up⁹ explicit in another way with their premonitory film *The Kiss* (1896), a brief tableau borrowed from a successful Broadway play (in other words, from the bourgeois theatre). Edison himself, it seems, lost all interest in the cinema when he realized that his dream of 'reproducing life' was impracticable in the short term (as president of a vast trust, of course, he would soon display a keenly renewed interest!). Nonetheless, through his vision of the cinema and in the drift of the early experiments made under his direction, his name stands for the presence, during the cinema's beginnings, of forces stemming directly from the bourgeois ideology of representation; forces which were, before too long, to exercise an overwhelming influence on the future of the film industry.

But the 'invention of the cinema' did not take place solely in Orange, New Jersey.

Georges Sadoul is correct in stressing that the first programme at the Grand Café offered *themes whose class content was perfectly evident* to a clientele recruited on the *Grands Boulevards* of Paris: they saw that distinguished representatives of the solid citizenry of Lyons were showing off *their wives, their children, their pastimes* – in short, *their property*. Yet these films also possess another dimension. Although the class content of a film like *La Sortie des Usines Lumière* is identical to the rest on an iconographic level – the Lumières show *their workers* just as they show *their private harbour* at La Ciotat – it presents (along with *L'Entrée d'un Train en Gare*, *Recréation à la Marinière*, *Lancement d'un Navire à la Ciotat*, and innumerable other films from the first Lumière catalogue) a *representational approach* diametrically opposed to the

9 A vocation deriving in our cultures from the codes of social distance as classified by the semiological discipline known as *proxemics*, whereby the close-up corresponds to the 'intimate distance' associated with bodily contact (intercourse or wrestling) cf Edward T Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, London, 1969.

96 one in *The Kiss*, or for that matter in *Le Déjeuner de Bébé*. And this approach, which consisted in setting up a camera outside the factory gates and cranking the handle as soon as they opened in order to record an event which was certainly predictable in general outline but totally unrehearsed in detail, is still akin to the 'scientificness' of Muybridge photographing a galloping horse, or Marey birds in flight.¹⁰ These 'documentary' images on the one hand, and the 'narrative tableau' of *L'Arroseur arrosé*¹¹ on the other, were to give birth to a sort of *panoramic view* – an acentric, 'non-directive' image leaving the eye more or less 'free' to roam over the entire frame, and to organize the signifiers as it will (as best it can); an image, moreover, in which the presence of the characters never predominates over their environment,¹² but is invariably inscribed within it.¹³ And it was *this view*, to be seen in both the films of Méliès and Edwin S Porter's work for the Edison company, which was to dominate cinema the world over for more than ten years.

Of the four vitally important Porter films of 1903 that are known to me, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the most purely primitive; that is to say, it resumes and strikingly illuminates some of the principal features of the period. It also shows that the primitive mode of representation was not simply an 'obstacle'; despite the opprobrium habitually levelled against the primitive 'theatricality' in terms of which this film is entirely conceived – and which I shall attempt to reconsider – it is a remarkable piece of work. Made following the popular success of a stage version of Harriet Beecher Stowe's celebrated novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an admirable example of the relationship which apparently existed between the primitive cinema and its audience. In the context of the system prevalent today (and this has been true for more than sixty years now), a screen adaptation of even a very well-known work must 'make as though' that work had no previous existence outside the film. The 'digest' that is made of it must hold water on its own: a typical Hollywood adaptation, even of the Bible, will identify and establish all its characters and situations *as though introducing them for the first time*, in accordance with the canons of the en-

10 The etymology of the name given by the Lumières to their invention (*Cinématographe*: 'inscription of movement') as against the Edison/Dickson *Vitascope* ('image of life') neatly summarises the distance separating their respective ideological approaches.

11 Possibly derived from a contemporary strip cartoon.

12 The contrast with the black background in Dickson's interiors is striking.

13 This is the great paradox involved in the literal transposition to the screen of the proscenium frame: the characters are suddenly 'crushed' by sets which they would have dominated in the theatre through their voices and their 'presence' in relief, as well as the use of lighting . . . and opera-glasses.

closed, autarchic world of the bourgeois novel where the story (and history, for that matter) exists only in so far as it is invented by the text. A film like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which 'tells' a novel several hundred pages long in some twenty tableaux and in ten minutes, was predicated upon the knowledge of the audience, who were left to fill in enormous narrative gaps for themselves (possibly with the aid on occasion of a lecturer, but whose role was to jog the audience's memory rather than to take its place). Each tableau is preceded by a title, such as 'Eliza asks Tom to Go Away with Her'. Apart from their obvious reliance on the spectator's previous knowledge of the novel (the title quoted in the first in the film), these succinct titles always refer to the climax of the tableau, often still some time away. For example, 'Eva and Tom in the Garden' introduces a tableau which begins with a long dance number performed by black servants before Eva and Tom make their entry. There is therefore *no direct causal link between title and image* of the kind which was, of course, to become the rule after 1915 (and which would find its equivalent in the word/image relationship after 1929). Each tableau is thus programmed in advance, each *coup de théâtre* is 'given away' in advance, which obviates all effect of suspense and induces, with the complicity of the audience, an expectation quite different from the kind of expectation involved in the bourgeois theatre and novel, for instance. Actually, the notion of suspense is entirely irrelevant here, since the audience, knowing the story already, ultimately did not come to discover its twists and turns, but to look at the pictures, to enjoy the concatenation of a series of spectacularly presented archetypes – to browse through an album of sumptuous photographs illustrating a text which was to be found elsewhere: it came to participate in a ritual of confirmation.¹⁴ One thinks of the medieval Japanese courtesans contemplating the scrolls which illustrated familiar stories handed down over the centuries. And this is only one of the ways in which the primitive cinema more closely resembles the arts of the Orient than those of the bourgeois West.¹⁵

Uncle Tom's Cabin, according to the historians of linearity, is a 'retrograde' film. And the montage model it presents is indeed the first and the most elementary produced by the cinema (around 1896): a succession of tableaux without continuity links, either spatial or temporal, undoubtedly 'modelled' on the theatre, but – and the qualification is important – the *popular* theatre: we are a long way from the 'three unities' which the bourgeois theatre borrowed from the classical breviary. And one has to be com-

¹⁴ It is of course difficult to imagine how recent immigrants, said to form the main clientèle of the nickelodeons (in order to perfect their English, according to Billy Bitzer) reacted to a film like this.

¹⁵ In Japan, the cinema retained its 'lecturer' (the *benshi*, derived in particular from the doll theatres) until 1937.

98 plètement blinded by the ideology of 'progress' in the cinema not to realize that within the framework fixed by this model, no matter how elementary, remarkable films were produced: Haggard's *The Life of Charles Peace* (1904), for instance, or Billy Bitzer's *Kentucky Feud* (1905), not to mention films which have, admittedly been more universally recognized, like Zecca's *L'Histoire d'un Crime* (1901) or Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). These films, deriving from popular entertainments and bearing no real relationship to the theatre of Shaw, Feydeau, Antoine or Belasco, constitute a cinematic 'specificity' whose legitimacy we should, after Warhol, after Godard, be in a position to recognize. We can, in other words, no longer impugn the plebeian origins of the cinema, taxed with 'theatricality', as a sort of original sin expiated by the 'great Griffith'. In fact Griffith and his more innovatory contemporaries were to endow the cinema with the essential characteristics of another theatricality – that of 'the grown-ups', of the bourgeois theatre – through a number of contributions which were undoubtedly constituent of a second 'specificity'. The failure of the attempts to make a pure and simple transposition of the bourgeois theatre to the screen (*Films d'Art*), a failure due precisely to the basic incompatibility between the primitive mode of representation and the codes of the bourgeois theatre, had shown that only the establishment of a thoroughly haptic screen space, the linearisation of the visual signifiers (through montage, 'centering', and lighting), the constitution of an *enveloping* diegetic space-time, and so on, could in fact 'render' what was essential to this theatre (as well as the novels and paintings) prized by the middle classes . . . the lack of which was being increasingly sharply felt by film-makers, producers and the more perspicacious critics, notably in America.

But no history of the cinema claiming to be informed by historical and dialectical materialism can any longer give absolute precedence to this second 'specificity' – the institutional mode of representation – over the first, from either a heuristic or even an aesthetic point of view.

The first manifestations of a narrativity through montage (the juxtaposition of several shots temporally and spatially disjoined, and linked principally by a knowledge of the story to which they refer: a system of which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a belated and fully achieved example) were the innumerable versions of *The Passion* which flourished in both Europe and America after 1896. Without the aid of a single inter-title,¹⁶ sometimes presumably without even a narrator, these sequences of visually autonomous tableaux

16 These do not seem to have been incorporated into films prior to 1900; the magic lanterns with which the more prosperous fairground booths were equipped were apparently used only to project the opening titles. Since each tableau of the *Passion* films was sold separately, each had its own opening title.

nevertheless formed an easily recognizable narrative progression, where everyone knew what had gone before and what was coming next, and where everyone spontaneously furnished all the necessary mental 'articulations'.

Next came a more elaborate form, which held sway for a good ten years: *the chase film*, thought to have been conceived in England around 1900. The trend of this evolution is obvious: at each stage, the concern was to weave closer and closer *and more and more significant* links between the successive tableaux. To start with, lacking the more sophisticated liaisons which were not long in appearing (match-cutting systems, alternate montage, and so on), film-makers contented themselves with launching a narrative course, clearly constructed from one tableau to the next, which would forge a chain of spatio-temporal sequentiality *no matter what*. No matter that the screen direction (and/or entries and exits from the frame) comprised 'bad matches' (according to criteria formulated much later, of course); the simple situation of the chase, bi-univocally concatenated from one shot to the next by its very nature, sufficed to make the narrative movement *legible*. This was the first decisive step towards closure, towards the linearity of the institutional mode.

With *The Life of an American Cowboy* – also 1903 – it becomes evident why Porter is the 'Janus' of this period. With this film he had – to talk like a traditional historian – one foot effectively 'in the past' and one 'in the future'. Admittedly phrases like this do relate to a very real trend in history; but for my part I shall simply say that this film has some of the characteristics of two modes of representation, one of which was to succeed the other, but cannot be said to embody the future all on its own.¹⁷ And it is precisely the co-existence of these two modes within the same 'text' – and above all the manner of this co-existence – that makes Porter's films so arresting and, from a heuristic point of view, so important. *The Life of an American Cowboy* opens with a series of tableaux showing 'scenes from daily life' in a settlement in the Far West (and one cannot stress too highly the fact that at this time the terms still referred to a living reality; hence, perhaps, in part, the extremely realistic effect of some of the tableaux in this film – or in *Kentucky Feud*). Nothing seems to bind these tableaux together, unless (possibly) the continuing presence of the same characters. These characters, however, are still so dwarfed within the frame, and their dress so similar,¹⁸ that to distinguish one from

17 The future was also *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, much closer to the primitives (or to us) than to Griffith or DeMille.

18 No doubt the zealous attempts to make films in colour, which very soon resulted in a number of ingenious processes, were largely due to a premonition that this problem of differentiation might be resolved by colour.

100 another is difficult, to say the least. One would be hard put to it, for instance, to assert that the characters seen in the saloon (where a somewhat intemperate cowboy rides in on horseback, and where a citizen is persuaded to 'dance' by six-gun bullets) are the same as the ones subsequently seen in front of the hotel (the arrival of a stagecoach full of tourists, an exhibition of lassoing). This latter shot, which is exemplary in its 'primitivism', with a small crowd moving about and several actions going on at once, lasts for several minutes. Then, about two-thirds of the way through the film, there is a radical change in narrative method: bandits attack the stagecoach, and in a series of shots which instantly arouse a sense of recognition in the spectator today,¹⁹ a 'thrilling chase' begins, still in long shot of course, but with the connection between the shots (both temporal and spatial) very clearly defined as being one of *proximity* (if not of actual contiguity). Here we are at the opposite extreme from the loose autarchy of the earlier tableaux which 'led' nowhere, and whose busy, acentric composition has been replaced by a determined effort towards simplification and 'centering' which greatly facilitates the establishment, link by link, of the chain of signification.

The Great Train Robbery, Porter's most celebrated film, made at the end of this crucial year, 1903, after *The Life of an American Cowboy*, extends this concatenatory structure to the whole film (with the exception, as we shall see, of one shot). Each tableau therefore now brings its 'brick' to the narrative edifice (Pudovkin's terms are already apt here), and we pass from one décor to the next with inexorable logic. The shots showing the robbery itself arouse a very strong impression of continuity and proximity, and certain articulations even come remarkably close to an effect of contiguity (which was undoubtedly anticipatory for the period). The final pursuit, notably with its crossing of a river followed by a relatively mobile camera, is a model of the genre already explored in England. Yet almost all the shots show the action from 'far away', so that it still remains just as difficult to distinguish between the characters. There is even one moment at which the modern viewer, attuned to certain codes which developed in symbiosis with the institutional mode, invariably assumes the horsemen riding towards the camera to be the lawmen, whereas they are in fact the outlaws, as one realizes only when the pursuing lawmen appear in frame behind them.

Given the course that Porter had taken, this remote impersonality, with its lack of *presence* and individualization, could not but be felt as a deficiency . . . just as it was by the bourgeois 'non-audience' which turned up its nose at Porter's films along

19 Which doubtless also explains why our impression of 'hyper-realism' vanishes too: for us montage, contrasted with 'non-montage', is an undeniable sign of 'fiction'.

with the rest.²⁰ No doubt that was why he added (and this may have been a 'first') a close shot of a man (the Edison catalogue states that it is 'Barnes, leader of the outlaw band') aiming his gun at the camera 'and firing point-blank at each individual in the audience'. But the most remarkable thing is that this shot was originally delivered to the American nickelodeons and the fair-ground cinemas of Europe in the form of a separate reel; *it was up to the exhibitors to decide whether to stick it on at the beginning or the end of the film.* 101

This shot is rich in its implications. In the first place, in addition to being what was no doubt an excellent publicity gag aimed not at the audience but at the exhibitors (at a time when they were beginning to clamour for novelty), the gesture of allowing exhibitors to choose where to place the shot suggests that the production executives, even though they may have realized what it introduced into the Lilliputian world of the remaining tableaux in terms of an *individualized presence*, had absolutely no idea what to do with it. Not only did they feel it impossible (they were in fact not yet in possession of the necessary syntactical means) to introduce this shot during the course of the film – would it not break up just this effect of continuity which had been so hardly won? – but they were very probably unable to settle the problem of whether it should go at the beginning or the end. Placed at the beginning, of course, the 'frightening' effect of this unaccustomed image might soften the spectators up emotionally; but would they not then be disappointed by the subsequent return to and maintenance of separation from the spectator and the codes of acting that entailed? Placed at the end of the film, the shot might have a surprise effect (by contrast with the preceding ones) and leave the spectator with a pleasant memory; but in that case, would the shot 'colour' the whole film as one might hope?²¹ Because, of course' this strategy however prophetic it may have seemed, also remains a 'step backwards' as our advocates of linear interpretations would say, because it in fact undermines the narrative closure which was beginning to establish itself at this time. The shot is not an element in the film; it simply purports to establish a new kind of link between the spectator and the screen (and the metaphor of an outlaw firing straight at the camera indicates clearly enough the sort of relationship – fascinated aspiration and forcible rape – it was to be). But it does so from 'outside' the diegesis: this outlaw is in fact the lecturer in a new form. What we have here is therefore a device that is essentially primitive in character, both in its quality

20 With the exception, it seems, of travel films and other documentaries, though these were still made 'in the Lumière manner'.

21 It goes without saying that I do not claim, here or elsewhere, to be reconstituting the thoughts of people long since dead; I am simply trying to open out, in a graphic way, the area of speculation suggested by this shot.

102 of 'openness' and of paradoxical 'distancing' (at one level the gesture annihilates the distance, and at another, re-establishes it). Interestingly enough, this device of the 'emblematic' close shot soon became common practice and remained so for several years. Lubin's *The Bold Bank Robbery* (1907) begins and ends with a group portrait (in close shot) of the three protagonists,²² and it was not uncommon for a film to end with a close shot of the pretty heroine, whose charms had hitherto been revealed only in ensemble shots, smiling at the camera. One can imagine the reactions of a predominantly male audience to this sudden 'intimacy'.

By pointing to the existence of an earlier film called *Fire!* (1901) by the important English pioneer Williamson, some historians have sought to diminish the interest of *The Life of an American Fireman*, which is both the most impressive and most problematic of the films made in this key year in Porter's career. It is in fact true that these two films are very much alike, in both subject matter and narrative profile. But quite apart from the fact that Porter's film comprises very specific experiments which make it of exceptional interest to the historian, such attempts to project into the world of primitive cinema our conceptions of originality and plagiarism (deriving from bourgeois notions of private property) – in actual fact our repression of intertextuality – are merely another manifestation of the determination to linearize a phenomenon which is basically resistant. To take this attitude is to ignore the fact (while acknowledging it as an 'exotic' item) that for several years cinematographic pictures simply did not belong to anyone, either by law or by right (just as still photographs, for several decades, belonged to no one),²³ and there was a free circulation of ideas and images such as we can only guess at today. The notion of plagiarism is all the more irrelevant here in that most films borrowed both form and subject from elsewhere anyway – from the popular arts which comprised the last real 'public domain' – and that far from degrading 'original ideas', the films which 'copied' others frequently improved on them. (Sigmund Lubin's reputation for being a mere plagiarist does not always seem to me to stand up to a viewing of the films themselves, which are often very much above average in quality).

At all events, among the major contradictions of this period, as illustrated by Porter's films, the one that implies the deepest dis-

22 The effect here is even more 'progressive' than in Porter's case, since the characters, instead of being filmed against a black background, are in the setting shown in the following or preceding tableau. The match cut was not very far away – in fact the English, it seems, were employing it already: cf Cecil Hepworth's *Rescued by Rover* (1904).

23 cf Maurice Edelman: *Le Droit saisi par la photographie*, Maspero, Paris, 1972.

ruption is undoubtedly that which is illustrated in *The Life of an American Fireman*. The film opens with a montage often comprising ellipses so startling that one wonders how audiences could follow the story without a lecturer's help (in his office, the chief fireman dreams of a woman and child in danger – they are seen in vignette; in close-up, a hand breaks the glass and activates a fire alarm; in their dormitory, the firemen get out of bed and rush to the pole that leads to the engine-house; in the engine-house, the fire engines start up; the doors open, and the engines leave). Next, a series of shots corresponding directly to the 'cops and robbers' or Western chase: the engines hurry to the scene of the fire. Finally a long shot shows the burning house and the engines arriving. We pass inside the house (a rudimentary studio set): the woman makes an agitated appeal in front of the window, then collapses on to the bed. A ladder appears, then a fireman. He carries the woman to safety in his arms, returns, carries off the child, returns, and puts out the fire (the whole comprising lengthy intervals during which the frame remains empty between the successive disappearances and reappearances by the characters). The next shot shows the façade of the burning house. The woman appears at the window, makes an agitated appeal, and disappears. The firemen set up a ladder . . . and we see, obviously occupying the same length of time, the same action that we previously witnessed from inside the house.

Seeing this curious document in the form in which I have described it – that is to say, as it was deposited at the Library of Congress in 1903 – any historian worthy of the name ought to find the process of its 'dialectical' gestation obvious enough: sensing the as yet still distant possibility of absolute ubiquity in the camera – the possibility, that is to say, that the spectator might accept a series of shots as being different points of view of a single continuous action, rather than simply variants of 'what he might see from his seat' (here I am simplifying problems that are more complex) – Porter in fact films one action twice, from two different 'points of view' (actually the two were several miles apart, which also implies an extraordinary intuition of the possibilities offered by montage in the area of fictitious connections, theorized by Kuleshov some twenty years later). But at the same time Porter felt, probably with reason, that the audience was not yet ready to accept this sort of transportation in space-time, and he (or someone else, it doesn't really matter) decided to show the two actions successively . . . which obviously has the effect of undermining the already remarkably controlled sequential linearization of the preceding scenes. So once again one of Porter's 'steps forward' in fact ends by accentuating some features of the primitive cinema even more strongly than before: its non-homogeneity in *The Life of an American Cowboy*, its non-occlusion in *The Great Train Robbery*, and here its non-linearity.

But the historiography of this film comprises another lesson. Around 1940, it seems, on the strength of an entry in an Edison catalogue which appeared to suggest that this double sequence had been put together in 1903 in accordance with the rules of modern continuity, someone (who?) simply re-edited the film, leaving out parts that quite obviously originally belonged, and Porter was turned into the modest inventor of one of the basic syntagms of the institutional mode . . . some ten years before any such figure began to appear in the standard syntax. What is unfortunate is that a number of historians, including Georges Sadoul, continued to give credence to this myth following Lewis Jacobs, who appears to have been the first to take this catalogue into account. More interesting, however, is the question as to the authenticity or otherwise of the description. For if it should prove to be authentic (and for the moment I have no real evidence to the contrary), it might mean that the aspiration to this linear ubiquity which was to become characteristic of the institutional mode had reached a level where it could be written down but not yet realized on film – not because of some technical obstacle, but because of an enormous *blind spot* difficult for us to analyse. However, the fact that once these two shots were filmed, it was decided to connect them in a manner implying an obvious non-linearity rather than disturb the unity of the spatial viewpoint, seems to me to say a good deal about the *alterity* of the relationship these early films entertained with the spectators who watched them. Does it not suggest that the feeling of being seated in a theatre in front of a screen had, for spectators then, a sort of priority over the feeling of being carried away by an imaginary time-flow, modelled on the semblance of linearity which *ordinary time* has for us? But any such hypothesis is extremely hazardous, and would require the backing of a good deal more evidence before it could be seriously entertained.

Visionary, plagiarist, 'auteur' . . . none of these clichés can really help in situating Porter's work. It is the readiness to confine his films within these terms which leads so often to the obvious being bypassed; the fact that these films are the loci of contradictions, that their contradictions are also those of an era of cinema, and that neither can be deciphered except by way of this twin perspective. But once this decipherment has been achieved (and I can only claim to have prepared the way here: among other things, access to a far wider corpus of work is essential), it will enable us to determine absolutely basic matters concerning the genealogy of the institutional mode as well as the nature of the primitive modes; and it is probably in this respect that Porter's films will ultimately occupy a privileged place in the history of the cinema.

Translated by Tom Milne.

The *Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film* (FIAF) symposium in Brighton (May 1978) gave me an opportunity of seeing most of the remaining Porter films that have survived. These confirm the theses set forth here on the basis of what turn out to be, indeed, his most important films (to which, however, I would now add *The Life of An American Policeman* (1905). American scholars have now definitive confirmation of what has been for some years the prevailing hypothesis concerning *The Life of an American Fireman* (a distribution copy found in Maine is identical with copyright version) and while it was pointed out to me that 1903 is an incorrect date for *The Life of an American Cowboy*, the fact that this film actually dates from 1906 merely confirms that 'progress' in Porter's work, as in primitive cinema as a whole, was anything but linear.

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